

A Long Road Traveled

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Translated from Vietnamese by Ai Hoa Han

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Chapter 1. My parents and grandparents

Our ancestors came from Shan Mei Hamlet, Lin Wei Village, Fu Qing Township, Wen Chang County,^[1] Hainan Island, China.

Our great-grandfather was named Han Xu Zhun. He had three brothers. The oldest was called Han Hanh Zhun, the second was called Han Trung Zhun, and the third was called Han Dao Zhun. He was the youngest and the poorest in the family.

Our grandfather's name was Han Ji Feng. He was born and raised in a poor family, and did not even own a small patch of land. He had to sell his labor to other people, farming their land or doing other casual work for relatives and neighbors in order to feed his family.

His wife, our grandmother, was named Luu Thi. She came from a family in the neighboring Thang Long Hamlet.

Together they had four sons.

The oldest son was named Yun Yuan, but was commonly known by his nickname, Ton Lim. He was our father.

The second son's name was Wei Yuan. He stayed in the homeland, working on his land.

The third son died at birth.

The fourth son was named Yi Yuan. He emigrated to Vietnam.

With a big family, our grandfather's life was very hard. He died of exhaustion before reaching the age of forty, leaving a young wife and three boys. The oldest of them was our father, who was aged thirteen at the time of Grandfather's death.

After Grandfather died, his sons had to fend for themselves. Being small, they were only capable of light casual labor like leading cows to pasture and cutting grass for relatives and neighbors. In this way they managed to feed the family day by day. They led a miserable life.

When they were a little older, they decided to rent a small garden, where they grew mustard. They worked hard and grew more than they needed for themselves, selling the surplus at the market. Life was better than before.

When our father was twenty years old, he married his first wife, whose name was Ye Ai Fu. She came from a wealthy, respected family and was well educated, a lady of leisure.

Her feet had been bound since birth, so they were very tiny. She could not do any kind of farm labor, but she was very skilled with her hands. She earned a living by making clothes for relatives.

After being married for a while, our father thought that with a big family to feed life was still not much better. In hope of a better life, he requested his mother to visit his great-uncle (father's uncle) and ask him whether he could take any of the three brothers with him to work for him in Vietnam. His great-uncle was Mr. Thu. He was a wealthy man and owned a store at Canh Hang Market in Binh Dinh Province in Vietnam. He happened to be looking for workers at the time when our grandmother showed up, and was very pleased to do as she suggested. He offered to take our father and Fourth Uncle to Vietnam. (Fourth Uncle was our youngest uncle. He was called Fourth and not Third Uncle because there were originally four of them, even though one died at birth.)

Before the two of them left for Vietnam, Grandmother divided up the family possessions. The only possession the family had after Grandfather died was the small ancestral brick-roof house. The house consisted of two areas of equal size, each of which contained two bedrooms and a kitchen. She would live with our father in one half of the house, and her other two sons were given the other half.

According to Grandmother, while Grandfather was still alive he had borrowed nine silver yuan^[2] from a cousin named Mr. Four Feng. A relative of this cousin confiscated the bedroom of Fourth Uncle on his behalf, in lieu of the debt. However, Mr. Four Feng was a rich man – he bought and sold goods at Bong Son Market, also in Binh Dinh Province – and due to a superstitious dread of living with poor people no one in his family wanted to move into the room. So in order to maintain their claim they used the room as a storage space for books and old junk.

Many years went by and our family still could not manage to save enough money to repay the debt and get Fourth Uncle's bedroom back. Finally, in 1958, after the liberation of Hainan and the completion of land reform, Grandmother got hold of nine yuan to give Mr. Four Feng's relative and got the bedroom back.^[3] As Fourth Uncle was now in Vietnam, she gave it to Second Uncle and his family.

Our older relatives regarded Mr. Thu as a close kinsman and family benefactor. For that reason our father and Fourth Uncle had to work for him without pay. They received only food and two sets of new clothes and a few old clothes every year.

After a while, Fourth Uncle felt that he was too young to do such hard work, so he told Mr. Thu that he wanted to go to Saigon. There he found a job in a cafe. Father continued to work for his great-uncle.

Mr. Thu was well known in Canh Hang Market as a trader in herbal medicines and local produce. He also owned a lot of land back in Hainan, which he rented out in exchange for part of the crop, yielding high profits. As a wealthy man, he was a great connoisseur of wines, tea, opium, and prostitutes. He also loved to gamble. It was his unfortunate fate to contract leprosy. He was afraid that if he stayed in Vietnam the French colonial police would arrest him and place him in a leper colony, so he returned to Hainan to hide himself away and seek treatment. But it was the policy of the clan elders not to allow lepers to live in the village, so his distressed family built a small straw house for him at the beach (our village was near the seashore).

Alas, all his close relatives were very scared of leprosy and none of them wanted to go near him. One day his first wife had an idea. She went over to see our grandmother and talked sweetly to her. “Mr. Thu is our benefactor. He has taken care of our family. He took two of your children to work for him in Vietnam. He gave them food to eat and clothes to wear, so they did not go cold or hungry. Now that he is sick you should repay him for his kindness. You should send your daughter-in-law to the beach house to look after him.”

Grandmother was honest, truthful, and goodhearted. What is more, our Chinese mother came from a wealthy family. She was well educated, well behaved, and compassionate. When she heard Mr. Thu’s story, she understood his sad circumstances and felt very sorry for him. She volunteered to go to the beach house to care for Mr. Thu, but when she was almost ready to go Mr. Thu’s disease grew worse. Nothing could be done to help him and soon he passed away. Our Chinese mother was lucky to escape that dangerous disease.

Mr. Thu had a wife in Vietnam by the name of Diep Thi Thu, commonly called Mrs. Thu. When Mr. Thu returned to the homeland to seek treatment, he left his business in the care of Mrs. Thu and his son by his Chinese wife, whose name was Jie Yuan but who was commonly called Uncle Bang Mai. As time went by, Mrs. Thu and Uncle Bang Mai found that they could not live with one another. He left her and started his own business. Father and his cousin Han Bao Yuan stayed to help Mrs. Thu. Uncle Bang Mai soon lost his enthusiasm for his business and – placing it in the care of his wife – returned to the homeland and went into politics. He was elected vice chairman of the Fu Qing Town Council. He occupied this office until Hainan was invaded by the Japanese.^[4] Then he ran away.

Mrs. Thu was a wealthy woman. She was not only a wholesale trader in local produce but also a large landowner. She let out land to tenants and collected rent from them, so she had plenty of money.

Father was honest and goodhearted. He was very hardworking, careful, and conscientious, so Mrs. Thu trusted and loved him. She introduced him to her niece Tran Thi Quang (our mother) and arranged for them to marry. She lived in Dap Da Township, An Nhon County, Binh Dinh Province. She was born and raised in a cultured family from which she received a good classical education. She was independent, honest, and likeable – a wonderful wife and mother.

Our maternal grandfather was Tran Ngai, commonly called Teacher Ham. He was descended from the Minh Huong and Chiuchow groups of Chinese people.^[5] The French colonial government collected an annual poll tax of one franc^[6] per person on Vietnamese, three francs per person on Chinese of Minh Huong or Chiuchow origin, and ten francs per person on other Chinese. Many poor Chinese could not afford to pay ten francs but did not want to apply for naturalization as Vietnamese because then the local authorities would call them up for military or labor service and people would humiliate and ridicule them. So instead they applied for reclassification as Minh Huong or Chiuchow in order to pay less poll tax while continuing to be treated as Chinese and therefore exempt from military and labor service.

Teacher Ham had a good knowledge of Chinese literature and his writing was beautiful. He took the court examination several times but he was not destined to pass, so he taught for a living. He had no son, only two daughters: one of them is our mother, the other is our Aunt Du. He was well known and highly respected both by Chinese and by Vietnamese. He often helped people. Whenever anyone had any paper in Chinese they brought it to him for help in reading it. Later he left teaching and went into business. He also made fireworks, engaged in arts and crafts, grew tobacco, raised chickens, and so on. So his life was a prosperous one.

Tran Ngai loved his grandchildren. Every morning we paid him a visit and he always gave us money to go out for breakfast. We only stopped visiting him when the war against the French broke out.

He often took me along with him when he went on a business trip or to visit relatives or friends. He introduced me to the people we met. In that way I learned a lot about different ways of behaving. When the weather was good he also took me fishing. That was wonderful! In short, he lived a very full life.

Our maternal grandmother also loved us dearly. After we had spent grandfather's money on breakfast we would return to see grandmother. She would then take us out to eat again, always treating us to meat and cake. She was a Buddhist. On the first and fifteenth day of each month, as well as on holidays in accordance with the lunar calendar, she used to take us to the Buddhist temple to watch the monks chanting and praying to the Buddha, after which we visited relatives and enjoyed a very tasty vegetarian meal.

One year after my mother married, on January 26, 1926, she gave birth to me at Phuong Danh Hamlet, Dap Da Township, An Nhon County, Binh Dinh Province. I was named A Quang.

My father worked for Mrs. Thu. She trusted him and often gave him money to go to various places to buy produce wholesale and bring it back for sale. He was honest and careful and hardly ever made a mistake. On one occasion, however, Mrs. Thu gave him 40 francs for a trip to Kim Son in An Lao Province to buy a supply of dry betel.^[8] When Father reached Bong Son, friends noticed that he was carrying a lot of money and that it was Mrs. Thu's money. They talked him into going gambling. He got very excited and forgot everything in the heavens above and on the earth below. So he gambled with them and lost the whole 40 francs. That felt to him like the end of the world. Father knew that he was in serious trouble. There was no money left to buy anything for Mrs. Thu. She would kill him. He was so frightened that he hid away and dared not go home. Mrs. Thu waited a long time for his return. She guessed that something must be wrong. She sent people to find him, but he refused to go home. Mrs. Thu did not know what else to do. She forced Mother to come and work for her without wages to pay off the debt. Mother had no way out. She had to take me with her to work in Mrs. Thu's house. I was still less than a year old and was just learning to crawl.

Mrs. Thu told Mother that she would not let us go home until Father gave her back all her money – and that despite being Mother's aunt and my parents' matchmaker! Now, for the sake of 40 francs, she refused to recognize the relationship between her and her niece. She made Mother work like a slave for the family. She had to do all kinds of hard labor – to carry goods in and out of the store, to dry, husk, and cook the rice, to chop the wood, to wash the laundry, and to take care of the pigs and chickens. All day long she worked hard. Then in the evening she had to give Mrs. Thu a massage until it was dark, wait until she was deeply asleep, and tiptoe out. Every morning and night she had to boil a pan of water several times for her aunt's bath. She also had to comb her aunt's hair. She had to do this very carefully, because if by accident a single strand of hair fell out

Mrs. Thu would yell at her and beat her and sometimes even deprive her of her meal.

What a way to treat relatives of a respected classical scholar! We had a house but no land. In her childhood Mother had learnt only how to go to market and to cook. She never did any other kind of work. Now, in order to pay off her husband's debt, she had to work day and night like a slave, never daring to utter a word of complaint. She could hardly bear it, but she did not know what else to do. She had to hold her mouth shut, swallow her bitterness, and keep her tears to herself.

One day, so Mother told me, she was so busy at her work that she had no time to look after me. She left me on the floor. I crawled around and up a slope but lost my balance and rolled back down. Uncle Bao Yuan, who saw it happen, picked me up and put me in the bowl above the rice-husk grinding machine. But I crawled out of the bowl and fell right onto the top edge of the machine, lacerating my right eyelid. There was a lot of bleeding, but fortunately the eye itself was not damaged. Mother was very frightened and upset. She wept quietly but did not utter a word of complaint. I still have a scar on my right eyelid. That is the keepsake that Mrs. Thu gave me to remember her by. And I shall indeed remember her until the day I die.

Almost a year went by. Father remained at Bong Son working for somebody. When he heard about our plight and the accident he was sick at heart. He felt guilty for gambling away Mrs. Thu's money and causing such hardship for his wife and son. He resolved to put an end to the situation. He would return and confess his mistake to Mrs. Thu. He went to visit friends in various places, told them his story, and beseeched them to help him out. Some of them sympathized and lent him money. He finally returned and went to Mrs. Thu's house to give her the money, beg her forgiveness, and plead with her to be so kind as to allow his wife and son to go home.

Mrs. Thu happened to spot him as he approached the house. She yelled at him, called him names, and beat him. She told him that he could not take his wife and son home until he had paid her the 40 francs plus 20 francs interest. My parents begged her repeatedly but she was adamant. There was nothing they could do. Father had to go back to his friends and relatives and borrow the extra money. Again he went to Mrs. Thu. She took the money and ordered Father and Mother to get out of her house and never come back. They never did.

Notes to Chapter 1

[1] A township is an administrative unit below the county level that encompasses a town together with the surrounding rural area. Wen Chang County occupies the northeastern corner of Hainan Island.

[2] In 1889 China introduced a silver coin as the basis of a new currency -- the Chinese Yuan. It was equal in value to the Spanish "piece of eight" that had circulated in Southeast Asia since the seventeenth century due to the Spanish colonial presence in the Philippines.

[3] It was against custom to charge interest on money lent to relatives.

[4] The Japanese started bombing Hainan in mid-1938 and landed troops in February 1939.

[5] The Minh Huong were descendants of Chinese loyal to the Ming Dynasty who fled to Vietnam when the Ming were overthrown by the Qing (Manchus) in 1644. The Chiuchow were Chinese originally from Chiuchow Prefecture of imperial China (now eastern Guangdong Province). Of the various Chinese communities in Vietnam, these had been longest settled in the country and were best integrated into Vietnamese society. Many no longer even spoke Chinese. Vietnamese perceived them as less foreign than other Overseas Chinese. The two groups lived near one another and often intermarried, so many people were connected with both groups. For these reasons the two groups were often considered together.

[6] The main unit of currency in French Indochina was officially called the piaster, but it was tied to the French franc and colloquially referred to as the franc.

[7] Dry betel (not to be confused with the betel nut) is the leaf of a vine belonging to the Piperaceae family, which also includes pepper and kava. The leaf is glossy, light or dark green, and heart-shaped. It is used in South and Southeast Asia as a stimulant. Dry betel can be processed into a paste (wet betel) that is easier to chew.

Chapter 2. Father returns to Dap Da to start a new life

After paying off the debt to Mrs. Thu and being thrown out of her house, Father took Mother and me back with him to Dap Da, where he rented a small straw

house next to Dap Da Bridge. My parents settled in and had three more children, all of them girls – my three younger sisters. Thanh was born in 1928, Tanh in 1930, and Hanh in 1936.

Dap Da is not a large county, but it had 30 – 40 Chinese merchant families. They came from different parts of China – Chiuchow people, Fukien people, Hakka people, Hainan people, and so on. Most of them manufactured or traded in light industrial products. Some traded in general merchandise and in local produce like textiles and herbal medicines. There were truck dealerships and workshops for weaving and dyeing fabrics and towels, for making sugar, cookies and candies, packets of tobacco, soap, and incense, for packing teas and salted duck eggs, and even for printing money for the afterlife.

Some local Vietnamese also traded in local produce and general merchandise. Some engaged in such crafts as weaving and dyeing fabrics, extracting silk from silkworm cocoons, working with copper or gold, blacksmithing, making lacquers, tailoring, and woodworking. But their businesses operated on a smaller scale than those of the Chinese. At that time Dap Da had a highly developed economy. After Qui Nhon City, it was the second most important economic center in Binh Dinh Province. Under French rule Dap Da was to become the largest economic center in the province.

Father had learnt his lesson well and mended his ways. He often went on trips to make money for his family. Father was very honest, helpful, and flexible in his business dealings. He was someone people could trust. So many merchants, both Chinese and Vietnamese, liked him and did business with him.

The period from March to June by the lunar calendar is the season for harvesting soybeans and pressing them to make soybean oil. Three Chinese wholesale merchants in Dap Da – their names were An Thiet Ky, Thai Phong, and Hang Hanh – entrusted Father with money and set the prices for his purchases of soybean oil and soybean condensate. Each season Father bought about 500 tons of soybean oil and thousands of tons of soybean condensate. His business went well and our family's life improved. He knew people from near and far.

Our house was next to the bridge – a very convenient place to catch the bus. Chinese relatives and compatriots living in various villages on the way to Qui Nhon or Bong Son often stopped at our house to stretch their legs before catching the bus. Whenever relatives or friends came to visit, Father welcomed them with open arms and treated them to a fancy meal.

Because Father was generous and courteous relatives often praised him by calling him “Mr. Bang Lim” (the real Bang Lim was a very famous man who lived in

Qui Nhon and was the head of a Hainanese clan). The nickname Bang Lim came to replace his real name (Tuan Nguyen).

Chapter 3. Return to the homeland

For a long time Father had not seen Chinese Mother and Grandmother because he was so busy working and had not saved enough money to go back home and visit them. Now he had the time and money, so he decided to visit them. He took me with him so that Chinese Mother could take care of me and have me educated in the Chinese family tradition. I would get to know the way of life of the homeland and its literature, culture, and customs. Otherwise I might lose my roots.

Wen Chang County was our home area. It had little fertile land but a very dense population. Most of the soil was poor and rocky. To make matters worse, the climate was very severe, with frequent typhoons, floods, and droughts. The local economy was very backward. Most of the peasants lived in great poverty and misery despite working hard the whole year round. They were often hungry and did not have enough warm clothes. For breakfast they had only a few boiled sweet potatoes or manioc. For lunch and dinner they had rice soup, consisting of 20 – 30% rice mixed with 70 – 80% sweet potatoes and flavored with fish sauce and with mustard that they grew in their gardens. On most days that was all they ate. Occasionally they had a bowl of rice with meat or fish. Only at the New Year and on other major holidays could they eat their fill.

Local residents, and peasants in particular, had lived this hard life for thousands of years, generation after generation with no change for the better. Many people were unable to survive and had to bid farewell to their parents, wives, and children and leave their homes and native places in order to start a new life in a foreign land. I heard it said that about half a million people had left Wen Chang County. (Wen Chang County did have one point in its favor. It was a famous center of literature and culture. It was often called “Literature and Culture County.”)

Father himself had lived that hard life. He had a deep understanding of the situation in his homeland. Moreover, I was my mother’s one and only son and she did not want me to separate from her. However, for the sake of my future character she gave her consent and allowed Father to take me for character training in the homeland.

And so in August 1934, when I was eight years old, Father took me to Da Nang, where we boarded a ship for the Hainan seaport of Bac Hai. However, we disembarked at Hai Kou, the capital city of Hainan. After our arrival Father and my Chinese mother named me A Son. After a stay of two months Father said goodbye to my grandmother, my Chinese mother, and me and returned to Vietnam. The next year my Chinese mother gave birth to my youngest sister, Quynh Anh.

At the beginning of 1935 I started school. I attended Thanh Dat School in the nearby town. The headmaster was named Han Trac Du. He gave me the name Han Hung Quang.

I finished primary school in two years. Then financial difficulties forced the school to close. The children from wealthy families transferred to Dong Duc School in the next town. We poor children could not afford the fees, so we were unable to continue our schooling. I stayed home and helped Chinese mother by fetching yarn for her to knit fishing nets. I also chopped wood for her. When I had any free time I went fishing and to pick up fish so that we would have extra food to eat.

“Picking up fish” really meant begging the fishermen for fish. Every day when the sun rose I accompanied an older cousin named Anh Quang and some young men from the town to the dock in order to wait for the fishing boat to return from the open sea. As soon as the boat docked we jumped into the water and tried our hardest to clamber on board, even though the water came up to our necks and the deck was very high. The family who owned the vessel took pity on us: however small their catch, they always gave us something. When the weather was good and the catch large, they filled our basket full of fish (about 4 – 5 kilograms); when the weather was bad and they had caught only a few fish, they still let us have some. We never had to go home with an empty basket. Maybe they had a superstitious fear that if we returned empty-handed then on their next trip so would they.

Once, when everyone was busy with the harvest, Chinese mother asked me to look after a relative’s cow. This was the first and only time in my life that I ever took care of a cow. When the cow had eaten her fill I led her home and tethered her to a tree trunk in front of the house of Grandfather’s cousin Mr. Dai Fong. Knowing nothing about cows, I left our cow next to his. I was surprised to see that instead of making friends the two cows began to fight head on. Mr. Dai Fong’s cow, frightened and hurt, made a lot of noise, broke the rope, and ran away.

Alerted by the noise, a very angry Mr. Dai Fong took a walking stick and went off looking for me. He stepped into the house, immediately saw Chinese

mother, and yelled insults at her. Why, he asked, had she let her son tether the cow next to his cow, with the result that she butted her and made her break the rope and run away?

Poor Chinese Mother was scared to death. She wept and pleaded with him to allow her to go and find his cow, but he would not listen. He kept on yelling and insulting her and struck our family altar table with his walking stick until it was disfigured (the altar table was where we placed food and burned incense to worship our ancestors). Chinese Mother dare not say a word – she just wept. I was hiding in the house and saw all this happen. I did not show my face for several days. Never again did I dare look after a cow, whoever might ask me to.

When I returned to visit the homeland in 1988, Fifth Uncle (Tri Nguyen) came over to see Mr. Dai Fong's son. He pointed at the disfigured altar table and in an excited and comical voice told the story to the people gathered there.

With no school to attend for the time being, we stayed at home and played. Some parents in the village were concerned that many children from poor families were not going to school, so they organized and raised funds to open a night school. The students were taught by the three brothers of Uncle Han At Nguyen – Mr. Dai Fong's sons. They mainly learned how to write Chinese characters and how to use the abacus.

Due to lack of funds the school was open for only one year. So in 1937 all the schools in the village closed. In 1938 the education department in Wen Chang County organized a mobile school and sent teachers to Six Generations School in the temple of the Han clan to teach without pay as a duty to the clan. Students did not have to pay fees. In accordance with customary attitudes, people who had money looked down on Six Generations School and refused to send their children there. Only children from poor families went there. Only three children from our hamlet attended Six Generations School – me, my older cousin Anh Quang, and a neighbor named Kham Quang who was Mr. Tai Nguyen's nephew. All three of us were from Vietnam.

The headmaster was named Mr. Fu Fung Dinh. He taught selected condensed courses from the secondary school curriculum. The school was far away from home. Every day we had to bring a packed lunch to eat. Our lunch was a bowl of rice soup or sweet potato soup with salted fish and kimchi.^[1]

One day Anh Quang set off for school carrying two bowls of rice soup in bamboo baskets hanging on each side from a shoulder pole. Halfway there he tripped and fell and the soup spilled and mixed with the mud. We were very upset about it but did not know what to do. That day we had no lunch: we had to learn

on an empty stomach. I got so hungry that I fainted. When I got home I did not tell Chinese Mother what had happened, but when she saw the sad look on my face she thought I had skipped school and yelled at me. I still did not dare say anything. As Chinese Mother thought that skipping school was a bad thing she was very angry and threatened to hit me. When I heard her say that I was afraid of getting hit, so I told her the truth. As she listened her heart ached and she cried. She felt sorry for me because after fasting all day I had come home only to be yelled at for nothing. She regretted her quick temper.

Chinese Mother loved me very much. I was her favorite. She never raised her voice at me again.

I liked to study and worked very hard, so my results were excellent. At the end of the school year I passed the examination for entry to secondary school, but the school was about to be moved to a different place. The headmaster had noticed my talents and hard work and had a great liking for me, so he asked me to go with him to the new place to continue my education. Unfortunately, Chinese Mother did not let me go, because she could not bear the thought of me going so far away. Another problem was that I was not her own child. If while I was away my parents should ask to have me back she would not know what to say. So I lost my only chance to go to the Chinese school.

It was the custom of the Han clan to honor any boy belonging to the clan who has demonstrated special talents or exceptional intelligence. He is allowed to wear a long gown and take part in an annual ceremony to worship the ancestors at the ancestral temple. I too was granted this honor.

After the ceremony I was allowed to eat at the same table with the respected elders. I was also given a kilogram of pork to take home. It was a great honor for my family and especially for me. At that time life in the Chinese countryside in general and in Hainan in particular was very hard. People rarely had meat to eat, so getting a kilogram of pork was a splendid thing.

Our extended family in the homeland included my father's mother and the family of Second Uncle Vi Nguyen. Father's mother was a very truthful, quiet, and contented person. She never worried about family affairs. She was old and weak and relied on money that Father sent home for her.

Second Uncle was also a very decent man. He had no schooling, but he did have green fingers. He grew mustard and sweet potatoes. His family consisted of five people – he and his wife, a son, and two daughters. They all depended on him. He knew nothing but hard work. He worked every day from dawn to dusk.

He was blind to everything around him. His wife insulted, bullied, and yelled at him all day long, but he never said anything in response.

His wife was well known for her foul temper. Every day she had to find something to argue about. She bullied not only her husband but also Father's mother, Second Uncle, and even my stepmother and myself. She often called me "Annamese^[2] boy," meaning that I was not pure Chinese. It hurt but we had to ignore her.

Every morning, when people had just woken up and had not yet even washed their faces, she was already arguing with her neighbors. She woke up the whole hamlet: even the chickens were scared of her and flew away with wings outstretched. She would not even leave the ghosts in peace. She must have got bored if a day passed without a good argument. If she had no one to yell at, then she was unable to eat or sleep.

Chinese Mother often told me: "Our family is poor, Father had to go overseas to work, so people look down on us and bully us. Be good, listen to your parents, and learn well. Then people will respect you and you won't be bullied any more."

I always remembered everything she said. I promised myself to follow her advice so that relatives and neighbors would be proud of me and my parents' hopes would be realized.

I lived in the homeland for five years. I was only Chinese Mother's stepson, but she loved me very much. She treated me as her own son and taught me how to be a good person. Apart from the single incident that I have described, she never hit or insulted me. She took special care with my food and clothing. In the old days the peasants in Hainan had to eat their rice mixed with sweet potatoes in a soup. Our family was in the same boat. For most of the time I was there Chinese Mother used to put a woven bamboo divider in the pan when she was cooking the soup, to keep the rice on one side and the sweet potatoes on the other. She ate the sweet potatoes herself and let me have the rice. She did everything for me and sacrificed everything for me. What she did for me was as high as the heavens and as wide as the ocean. I appreciated her for all the things that she did for me; they remained in my memory for the rest of my life.

Notes

[1] Kimchi is a traditional Korean dish made of fermented vegetables, usually Chinese cabbage with various seasonings.

[2] "Annam" is the word traditionally used in China to refer to Vietnam. Its literal meaning is "Pacified South."

Chapter 4. Refugees. Family reunion

In 1939, when I was thirteen years old, the Japanese army invaded Hainan. Japanese airplanes dropped bombs everywhere, killing and injuring innocent civilians. Everyone was frightened. People who had relatives in other countries – whether old or young, male or female – fled abroad. My parents sent money to Uncle Bang Mai and asked him to take the three of us – my stepmother, my stepsister Neo, and myself – to Vietnam. But Chinese Mother could not bear to leave Father's weak and aged mother on her own, so she refused to go. She wanted to stay and look after her. She told me to go with Uncle Bang Mai without her. This prospect made me very anxious, for I loved her very much and did not want to separate from her. I asked her to go with me, but if she insisted on staying then I too would stay.

When Chinese Mother heard me say that, she agreed to go with me. She arranged for Second Uncle to take care of Father's mother, then with heartbreaking farewells we departed from Hainan.

Uncle Bang Mai's business was organizing the journeys of people who wanted to go abroad. They had to pay him a lot of money. At first, knowing that our family was large and poor, he did not want to take us. But Chinese Mother kept on begging him until he reluctantly agreed. On this particular trip he took about a hundred people. The three of us went together with our older cousin Lim Quang, who lived in the same village.

The whole party of refugees embarked in a sailing vessel. We set sail from a point near our village on the East Sea and after two days arrived at the customs post at Guang Zhou Wan,^[1] where we all disembarked. Uncle Bang Mai immediately escorted his own family, our cousin Lim Quang, and the wealthy passengers to the local hotel. Our family and the other poor passengers were left at what was called a hostel but was in fact a very dirty empty house. The owner of the house gave each family a rush mat to place on the floor and use for eating and sleeping. White rice and water were delivered twice a day. Soon new refugees arrived from the Hainan countryside. They were very hungry, so when they saw the rice they forgot their manners and ran and fought to grab as much of it as they could. Those with quick feet and strong hands ended up with it all. The rest

of us – the old and weak, people with small children – just stood and watched the mayhem. But among the fighters there were also some good people who shared a little food with us, so our stomachs were not left completely empty.

We had to wait for a steamship to take us on to Haiphong. Every day at dawn Uncle Bang Mai would set off for the French concession to gamble and enjoy himself. At dusk he returned but ignored us.

A steamship bound for Haiphong arrived a few days later. Uncle Bang Mai sent someone to tell us to get our luggage ready for the voyage to Haiphong. As soon as the ship docked at Haiphong, people from various hotels rushed on board carrying stickers, which they stuck on passengers' luggage. The stickers showed the names of hotels – for example, Thien Nhien or Hai Luc Thong. Not being experienced travelers, we did not understand what the stickers were for.

Everyone lined up to disembark. We were the last ones to get off. When we passed through customs the customs officer confiscated several dried sea cucumbers that Chinese Mother had with her. She was very upset because the sea cucumbers were highly valuable natural remedies that had been passed down to her by her family. She said that they were used to treat many diseases^[2] and was sorry not to have left them at home. She had thought they would be safer if she took them with her.

After completing the paperwork, Uncle Bang Mai took everyone else to the Thien Nhien Hotel. We were left behind because we were the last ones in line and because with her bound feet it was difficult for Chinese Mother to walk. I had to carry Neo as well as the luggage. We had to walk slowly and rest often. We knew no Vietnamese – I had forgotten the Vietnamese I knew as a young child – and we had no money on us. By mid-afternoon we had lost our way. It was very hot and we were tired, hungry, and miserable. Then suddenly I remembered the “Thien Nhien” sticker on our luggage. When people passed by I pointed at the sticker and they gestured to show us the way. The hotel was in fact very near and we soon found it.

We took a little rest outside the hotel. Then suddenly a young man appeared out of nowhere, ran up to me, and pulled my silver bracelet off my ankle (it had been placed there as a lucky charm by my mother on the day I was born). I was shaking with fear. Chinese Mother shouted loudly. Uncle Bang Mai, who happened to be in the hotel at the time, heard the noise and came out to see what the matter was. He saw us but was not interested in hearing our story. He just yelled at us. Chinese Mother sobbed and lamented being a refugee and having to endure such suffering and humiliation. I did not know what to say. I

tried to reassure her: “Never mind. We are already here, we can’t do anything, let uncle say whatever he likes.”

After two days at Haiphong, Uncle Bang Mai arranged for us to take a train to Dap Da. It was a slow train: the journey lasted over 48 hours. It was only a few days since we had left the homeland as refugees, but we had already undergone many hardships. Despite that we were lucky. I had not seen my parents, sisters, and relatives for several years. But now we were together and happy. When Mother saw me tears filled her eyes and she began laughing and crying at the same time. Having no common language, we could communicate only by making happy noises.

Chinese Mother was very good and made herself independent of Father after we arrived in Vietnam. Besides household chores, she raised chickens, spun yarn, and sewed clothes. When autumn came she bought peanut oil and helped Father by doing the heavy job of collecting the peanut oil left over in empty drums and draining it into new drums. Every year she filled four or five drums in this way. Father allowed her to sell this oil and keep the proceeds for herself. Chinese Mother loved all my sisters and they loved her and Neo. She was a very honest and cheerful person, so our life together was happy, harmonious, and free of jealousy.

Mother’s father also loved Chinese Mother very much and treated her like his own daughter. In later years, after Chinese Mother and Neo had returned to the homeland, Mother and Grandfather often reminded me to take good care of them.

Notes

[1] Guang Zhou Wan was a small enclave on the southern coast of China that had been leased to France by imperial China. The French colonial authorities administered it as an entry point for people entering French Indochina.

[2] Sea cucumbers are actually marine animals (echinoderms). They are harvested from the South China Sea and consumed as a delicacy, usually in gelatinous soups or stews, and as a remedy for many ailments, including rheumatoid arthritis, rashes and inflammations, gum disease, joint pain, and macular degeneration (which damages the retina, impairing vision). It may also be effective against cancer.

Chapter 5. My schooling

As I was still young when we returned to Vietnam, Father wanted me to continue my education. However, there was no Chinese school in Dap Da. The nearest Chinese schools were in the provincial capital Qui Nhon and in Canh Hang. The school in Qui Nhon charged high fees that were beyond our means. Canh Duc School in Canh Hang was nearer and we had distant relatives there who might be willing to take care of me.

So Father tried to arrange for me to attend Canh Duc School. He asked Uncle Bang Mai to let me stay at his house, but although Father asked over and over again Uncle Bang Mai refused – even though he put up many children from rich families in his house for money. At that time, however, Uncle Four Hap, Uncle Bang Mai's brother and Father's best friend, was living just opposite Uncle Bang Mai's house. He was very wealthy and had no children of his own, so he loved me very much. When he saw the situation he told Father to let me stay at his house. In addition to providing board and lodging, he offered to pay the school fees and take care of all my needs. But Father was worried that outsiders might laugh at Uncle Bang Mai. The arrangement might hurt the relationship between the two brothers. Father thought that it would be better for me to stay at home and did not dare let me stay with Uncle Four Hap. So I was unable to go to school and stayed home to help with the family business.

When the season came to buy peanut oil and peanut oil cake, I went with my parents to buy them for delivery to various stores. I collected the money and kept the accounts. But that kept me busy for only three or four months of the year. Most of the time I had nothing to do. Such a waste of time! I got bored.

It was at this time that the An clan in Dap Da invited two teachers, Mr. Tran Nghiep Thu and Mr. Dang Van Ton, to come teach their children. I did not have the money openly to attend their lessons, but when I had some free time I would go and listen secretly from outside the classroom. In that way I managed to learn some more Chinese.

A while later the Chiuchow and Fukien Chinese in Dap Da also organized a night class for their children at their own homes. They invited two teachers, Mr. Tran Ngoc Ha and Mr. Ly, to teach Mandarin Chinese. There too I listened secretly in order to learn more Mandarin and especially to acquire the correct Beijing pronunciation. But these classes lasted for only one year.

Mother's father also used to teach Chinese. His house was full of Chinese books and stories. I went to visit him every day. He often taught me by giving me a story to read and then asking me to explain the story to him. If I did not

understand something he would explain it very clearly to me. In this way I learned more Chinese. It was to be a great help to me later on in my Chinese herbal medicine business.

But I was still spending too much time at home. Father saw that our neighbors' children were going to school and only I was staying at home, and this made him very anxious. He wanted me to go to school as well, but did not know how to pay for it. Finally Father let me attend a local private school where I learned Vietnamese (at that time very few Chinese wanted to learn Vietnamese – most ignored it). The teacher's name was Mr. Le An. He saw that I was very intelligent and worked hard. He taught me two classes in a single year. The next year I transferred to the public school in Dap Da for another year. My knowledge of Vietnamese was also to be a great help to me later on.

Chapter 6. I work for Uncle Bang Mai

After attending the Vietnamese school for two years, I stayed home and helped my father with his business as before. When I had nothing to do and felt sad, I often went out to relax and play with a friend named Nguyen Cuu Khoi. We had fun fishing by hand and net, catching snakes, shooting or catching birds, and the like. We always ended up with some tasty morsel to eat. Unfortunately, Father and Grandfather found out about our expeditions and stopped me going. They were worried that I might stay in the sun for too long and fall sick. And they thought it was not good for me to play so much.

After that I got into the habit of paying frequent visits to our neighbor Mr. Dong Loi. He was a herbalist. I helped him chop up herbs and prepare medicinal mixtures. And by observing him I learned how to buy and sell herbal medicines. Every day I spent the morning with him and then went home for lunch. I never stayed at his house for lunch. So Mr. Dong Loi and his family realized that I did not come to their house for food. He was very warm and liked me very much. He and I remained close friends from then on. Later, when I wanted to open my own herbal medicine business, he helped me with some money and sold me one of his houses to use as my store.

Uncle Bang Mai lived at Canh Hang. He had a trading company named Thien Thanh that bought and sold herbal medicines, local produce, and general merchandise. He had quite a few people working for him, including Mr. Lim Quang, Mr. Ty, Mr. Anh Quang, and Mr. Hoa Don. They were older and wiser and had a lot of experience, but they also liked to play and neglected the business. Then there was Aunt Bang Mai, who was very superstitious and avoided many

tasks out of fear of bad luck. So most of the workers did not get on well with her. Later they quit their jobs. Only Mr. Lim Quang felt obliged to remain, because Uncle Bang Mai had brought him to Vietnam during the Japanese invasion of Hainan. He had no relatives in Vietnam.

So Uncle Bang Mai was short of staff. Many times he came to our house to ask Father to let me come and work for him. At first Father did not agree, but Uncle kept on pleading with Father and reminding him of all the favors he had done for him -- bringing him to Vietnam, arranging his marriage, enabling him to have a son and heir (me), and so forth. Under this pressure and in view of the fact that Uncle was a first cousin, Father felt obliged to let me go and work for him.

Uncle Bang Mai entrusted me with all the management of his trading company. I also helped Aunt Bang Mai buy and sell general merchandise and deal with household affairs. Twice a day I had to cook food for Uncle (not rice, only other foods). Aunt gave me additional responsibilities. Every morning when I got up and every evening, I boiled water and brewed tea, burned incense, and worshipped the Buddha. It was the same routine twice a day, every day. Perhaps because I burned incense and worshipped the Buddha every day, I was later to read *The Water Margin*.^[1] Both these experiences had a strong influence on me. They helped me cultivate myself, become a better person, have a good quality of life, win people's trust by never lying or cheating, avoid evil pursuits, and find happiness in helping others. That too was a good thing.

For a while Uncle Bang Mai stopped trading in local produce. He went together with Mr. Lim Quang to Dong Ha in Quang Tri Province and opened a hotel there, which he handed over to Mr. Lim Quang to manage. The hotel did accommodate travelers, but it also served as a front for trading in "special produce" across the border with Laos.^[2] For reasons that I never understood this business venture soon went bankrupt.

Meanwhile I was managing the herbal trade for Uncle Bang Mai. The business went very well and made a lot of profit. Uncle's life was very comfortable and prosperous. His four children all went to school. He knew how to enjoy himself. He drank alcohol, smoked opium, frequented prostitutes, and indulged in gambling. Whenever he saw any delicious food he bought it and took it home to eat. He never worried much about money. Every morning he slept until about ten. For lunch he would eat a whole pig's intestine and wash it down with a whole liter of strong white rice wine. After lunch he would smoke several pipes of opium and then sleep until four or five in the afternoon, when he would get up for dinner. His dinner was always a delicious dish like stir fried fox with chicken, turtle and

chicken soup, eels and chicken in a slow cooking pot, duck or chicken or lamb in a slow cooking pot, or steamed fish (I would cook all these dishes). Then he would drink another liter of flavored rice wine and smoke more opium until his urge was fully satisfied. Then Uncle would take another rest and at about eight in the evening go to Thanh Minh Temple to play mahjong until two or three in the morning. When he got back home Uncle would lightly knock just once on the door. I had to get up immediately and open the door for him. If I happened to be asleep and did not answer the door quickly enough he would yell at me for a while. If he had been unlucky and lost his game he would vent all his anger on me.

Uncle would stay at home for 5 -- 10 days, then go to Qui Nhon for 5 -- 10 days to enjoy himself there, and then return. This was his usual routine. He did not bother with family or business affairs, provided that there was always plenty of money for him to spend.

Every day, after all my work was done, I would devote time to self-education. In Uncle's house there was a "Four Corners" dictionary^[3] and I used it to learn Chinese characters for basic phrases. If I did not know a character I would ask someone to show me. In that way I learned some more characters.

After the business in Dong Ha went bankrupt, Mr. Lim Quang did not return to Canh Hang but went to Qui Nhon, where he worked for Mr. Bang Teng. Later he married Miss Diep Lanh, Mr. Bang Teng's oldest daughter.

Family obligations forced me to work for Uncle Bang Mai for about two years. He did not pay me a salary for all my hard work, but only gave me food and two sets of new clothes per year.

After the loss of his business in Dong Ha Uncle's life was in ruins. He yelled and cursed loudly all day long. Every little trifle made him angry and irritable. Aunt Bang Mai, paralyzed by superstition, dared not do anything. I found the situation unbearable. I begged Uncle to let me return home to help with my parents' business.

It was during this time that Uncle Four Nghi Nguyen came down from Saigon to ask Father for money (since Father's return to Dap Da this uncle had come to visit him twice a year). On this visit he asked Father to let me go to Saigon with him and work in his cafe. Father refused. For one thing, he did not want me to go too far away. For another, he said that work in a cafe had no good prospects. And in Saigon I would easily become corrupted.

Notes

[1] *Water Margin* is one of the four classical novels of Chinese literature. The first complete edition was published in 1589. The story is set in the Song dynasty and recounts the exploits of 108 outlaws who gather in the marshland at Mount Liang in Shandong Province (thus the subtitle *Outlaws of the Marsh*). It is based on the historical record of a different group of 37 outlaws who were active in the Huainan area of Anhui Province and surrendered to the Song government in 1121.

[2] The "special produce" was opium and Uncle Bang Mai planned to import it from the mountainous opium-producing region known as the "Golden Triangle," which encompasses border areas of Laos, Myanmar, and Thailand. The trade in opium was illicit not because consumption of opium was itself illegal in French Indochina -- it was not -- but because it evaded the official state monopoly on opium, salt, and alcohol (Ellen J. Hammer, *The Struggle for Indochina 1940 -- 1955*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1966, pp. 68-9).

[3] A dictionary of Chinese characters compiled in accordance with the "four corner method," which was invented in the 1920s by the editor Wang Yunwu. The shapes found in the four corners of a character, from top left to bottom right, are coded as numerical digits, and characters with the same four-digit code are grouped together.

Chapter 7. I work for a farmers' union

Finally I left my uncle and returned home. It was at this time that the Japanese were starting to invade Vietnam. The situation became more desperate every day. The French colonial authorities prohibited free trade in peanut oil. They established farmers' unions everywhere to collect peanut oil and sell it wholesale. The farmers' union in Binh Dinh Province set up a wholesale agency run by Mr. Au Binh Son and Mr. Au Thuan Le. So Father and I were no longer allowed to trade freely in peanut oil and peanut oil cake. Instead we went to work for the agency. The pay was very good. This was the first time I received a salary, so I was very happy with the position.

Our job was to go to oil-pressing workshops to observe and supervise farmers who brought in peanuts, purchased with their own money, to press into peanut oil. However much oil they pressed, they had to sell it all to the farmers' union at a fixed price. For that reason the owners of the workshops did not make

a lot of profit. So they hid some peanut oil away in order to sell it later on the black market and make some additional profit.

Father and I were good and honest people. The owners of the oil-pressing workshops had been our business partners for many years, so we had great sympathy for them. We turned a blind eye and pretended not to know what they were doing, but we had to be very careful and keep the matter secret. If the authorities found out we could all go to prison. One workshop owner named Mr. Nghe hid away a barrel of peanut oil (20 kilograms) and was denounced by his neighbors. He was in prison for three months. Such a pity!

While I was working for the farmers' union, Mr. Au Bich Son took a strong liking to me. Whenever I visited Qui Nhon he invited me to his house for dinner with his wife and himself. This was a very special treat for me. He told his son, Mr. Hai In, that he must help and take good care of me. He told him to take me to buy new clothes and shoes, so that I would look like a young city gentleman. I had great respect for him and his wife. On the occasion of the lunar New Year I would visit their house to congratulate them and their family, and whenever I came to Qui Nhon I would check up on them and their health.

We worked for the farmers' union for over a year. Then the Japanese occupied the area and closed down the agency. We were all discharged. It was at this time that Father stopped working. Mr. Hai Te (Mr. Three Thuoc) and I moved to Phu Phong to help Mr. Truong Duc Phu, manager of the local peanut warehouse. This warehouse was at the top of a bare hill about ten kilometers away from Phu Phong Market. We did not cook for ourselves but hired a friend on a monthly basis to cook daily meals for us. This place was in the middle of the midlands wilderness, so food and water were scarce. Our meals consisted only of rice mixed with dry manioc slices and eaten with steamed or salted fish and a little salad dipped in fermented fish sauce or boiled bindweed.

Mr. Truong Duc Phu moved for a time to Dao Da. Mr. Hai Te and I stayed behind until the warehouse was emptied. Then I returned home to help with the family business as before.

Chapter 8. Misfortune strikes

I stayed at home to rest for a while. Then I happened to run into Mr. Lam Minh Chau, who was visiting Dap Da from Hoi An. He asked me to invest with him to buy rice and transport it to Quang Ngai for sale. We had just reached Tam Quan when we were stopped and turned back by Japanese soldiers. So we returned to Bong Son and sold the rice there. We used the proceeds to buy dry manioc slices

and transported them to Quang Ngai, but when we got there we were unable to sell them. Mr. Chau said that we could sell them in Hoi An. So we went to Hoi An but were unable to sell them there either. So Mr. Chau had to get his wife, children, and sisters to grind the manioc slices into flour and sell the flour. It took two months to dispose of it all. We counted the money and there was still enough for some fun. We divided the profit between us. I offered my share to Mr. Chau's relatives because they had contributed a lot of labor and were exhausted. In any case, it had been only a small investment.

This was the first time we had engaged in long-distance trade and we had failed. The reason was that we lacked experience. We were just learning the business and we were too honest. When we returned to Bong Son we should have bought a few bags of dry manioc slices and placed them on top of the bags of rice as camouflage. Then we could have got through easily to Quang Ngai and sold the rice at a good price.^[1]

In the first week of August 1944 my younger sister Thanh grew a boil over her upper lip with a head full of white pus. Not realizing the danger she was in, she pressed the pus out with her finger and got infected with tetanus. Although she underwent all sorts of treatments, nothing helped and a few days later, on August 11, she passed away. She was thirteen years old. Our family was in great distress. Father mourned all day long.

At that time American and British planes were dropping bombs all over the place. Roads and bridges were among the targets. But the bombs often missed their targets, killed innocent civilians, and caused a lot of damage. As our house was next to a bridge Father was afraid that it would get hit. Another danger came from Chinese informers who guided Japanese soldiers sent to arrest people. Many patriotic Hainanese were captured with their assistance. This was what happened to Mr. Au Bich Son, Mr. Au Thuan Le, Mr. Bang Teng, and Mr. Diep Nang Duc, among others. They were tortured until they lost consciousness and then revived. Mr. Au Thuan Le was given electric shocks until he died. Every day Father became more anxious and frightened. Together with overwork and grief at his daughter's death, it was more than he could bear. He stopped eating, was unable to sleep, and eventually fell seriously ill.

In early 1945, when Father's illness had become dangerous, Uncle Four Nghi Nguyen came from Saigon to ask Father for money. We ourselves were in a tight financial situation: all our savings had been spent, we had many mouths to feed, and business was slow. Nevertheless, Father grit his teeth, emptied his pocket, found 70 francs there, and offered them to Uncle. But Uncle refused to

take the money. He said that it was too little and demanded 100 francs and no less. When he heard that Father was at a loss. Tears filled his eyes and he admitted to Uncle that he was bankrupt. Then Uncle took the 70 francs, put them into his pocket, and swore that from that moment on he would no longer recognize Father as his older brother. Then he went to wait for the bus to take him back to Saigon.

He was true to his word. He never came to see Father again. What a miserable character! Uncle disowned not only Father but even his grandparents and ancestors. He cared only about money. He cared nothing for his own blood brother! He was a gambling addict. He worked in a cafe in Saigon and was paid a good wage, but however much he earned he lost it all gambling. At the beginning of 1945 he was still unmarried.

Father had been ill for more than a year. We did all we could to get treatment for him, but nothing helped. On July 7, 1945 (June 10 in the Year of the Cock according to the lunar calendar) Father passed away at the age of 52. At that time Mother was only 37 years old.

We were all very sad when Father died. We missed him. He was survived by Mother, Chinese Mother, and four of us children. Because of Father's long illness all our savings were gone. The only possessions Father left behind for us were an umbrella and an old pair of leather shoes. Mother said: "These shoes are those he bought for and wore at our wedding. After that he wore them only on the first day of the Chinese New Year. On all other days he wore a pair of wooden shoes, even when he went on a long walk."

Poor Father! Family hardships and business troubles cut his life short and he died while still young. Mother and Chinese Mother lost a kind and loving husband; we children lost a good and gentle father. Our cup of sorrow overflowed.

After Father's death our family suffered greatly. Our life was hard. We were a big family but had no money. But fortunately we were all able to bear the hard life that we shared together. We worked hard: some of us were employed as yarn spinners, while I wove fabric. We lived hand to mouth, but -- thank God -- we earned enough to keep body and soul together.

Some time after Father passed away, my younger sister Four Tanh married and went to live with her husband's family.

During Father's illness our family still had a large number of peanut oil cakes. Father had told Mother to sell them to the Thin brothers in Mo Duc County in Quang Ngai Province. Mr. Thin and his brother were old customers of our

family. They used to pick up our merchandise first and pay us back after selling it. They were very honest and trustworthy. They had done business with our family for many years. They always paid us down to the last sou.^[2]

This time, however, we were out of luck. The Thin brothers picked up the peanut oil cakes just a few days before Father's death. They transported them to Quang Ngai, but had not yet sold them when the August Revolution of 1945 broke out.

The August Revolution was a terrible storm that rocked the heavens and shook the earth. People all over the country (most of them peasants) and especially in Quang Ngai Province rose up in noisy crowds and overthrew the colonial regime.^[3] All those connected with the old regime, such as city officials who had close relations with the French or Japanese authorities, were taken away by the revolutionaries to have their heads chopped off or be buried alive. Thousands of people died a horrible death during the first two or three days of the revolution in Mo Duc and Duc Pho counties of Quang Ngai Province alone. Mr. Thin's younger brother was one of them. Mr. Thin himself was lucky enough to escape because he was away from home at the time, but all his and his brother's possessions, including our peanut oil cakes, were confiscated. So our family was also affected. In fact, it bankrupted us. But such was the will of Heaven.

Mr. Thin had no money to pay us back. He pleaded with Mother to allow him more time so that he could find some way to repay us by instalments. He promised not to let our family down. But times had changed. Mr. Thin was no longer able to do business. After a long time had passed, Mother went to his house to ask for the money he owed us. He still had no money for us, but he gave Mother some sweet potatoes as a gesture of apology. That was the end of the matter. It was a real pity.

Notes

[1] The Japanese tried to control the movement of rice in order to starve areas where resistance to their occupation was especially strong. Manioc is of little nutritional value and its movement was not of concern to them.

[2] Small French coin worth five centimes (a twentieth of a franc).

[3] The August Revolution was facilitated by the power vacuum created in Vietnam by the surrender of Japanese forces announced on August 15 (though not formally signed until September 2).

Chapter 9. I work at An Ky, Thien Sanh, and Quang A

For a while I wove fabric for people, but I got bored just doing that every day. So I left and started working for the An Ky Store, owned by Mr. Six Lim Hoa's uncle, at Dap Da. This store sold not only herbal medicines but also fabrics, iron pieces, and general merchandise. I was put in charge of the herbal medicines and also helped with the iron trade. Handling the iron was very hard work. I had to carry the iron pieces in and out of the store for customers to choose. The pieces left over had to be taken back to storage. If they were left outside they would rust and could no longer be sold. When there was a market day at Binh Dinh I, together with a number of Vietnamese workers, had to pull and push a large cart full of fabrics to the market for the storeowner's wife to sell. In the evening we had to bring the cart back. We did the same when there was a market day at some other place.

Once I was so busy working that I put a bottle belonging to the storeowner's family on the table. Suddenly a chicken flew in from somewhere and smashed the bottle. The storeowner's wife got so upset that you would have thought her heart was broken. She told me that I would have to pay the cost of a new bottle. I felt angry and amused at the same time. She seemed to me a mean and petty-minded person. A bottle was not worth much, after all. I ran home and brought a bottle back to compensate her for the loss. I immediately quit the job, even though the storeowner pleaded with me to stay on. He was unable to find a replacement for me, while he himself lacked the necessary knowledge of herbal medicines. He had to close the store.

Next I went to work for Thien Sanh Store at Binh Dinh Market. This store sold herbal medicines and fish sauce. Thien Sanh was an investment company. The shareholders had appointed Dr. Xi and Mr. Ca (Mr. Dan Loi's older brother) to manage the company jointly. I was the accountant as well as a salesman. Dr. Xi was a Chinese doctor who had graduated from University Medical School in Canton. He had a good knowledge of herbal medicine. He was honest and straightforward but very strange. He often yelled at someone who disagreed with him. He used to help his uncle at Go Boi. His uncle's wife was a Vietnamese. She often said nasty things to him, so he hated her and for that reason hated all Vietnamese.

Thien Sanh's business situation was very good at first, but as a result of the bad attitude of Dr. Xi, who often got angry with customers, they gradually lost their customers. When a patient came to see him for herbal medicine, it would have been enough for him to feel the patient's pulse, choose the remedy, and write a prescription. But he was too honest and straightforward and worked like a conscientious professional physician. Many diseases -- malaria, for example -- really could not be cured by herbs but only by Western medicine. So he often advised patients to go to a Western doctor for an injection or to obtain Western medicine. Patients misunderstood this. They thought that he was a quack and did not come again.

As for Mr. Ca, he did not really care about the business. He was grieving for his wife and son, who had recently died. All day long he played mahjong in order to drown his sorrow.

Under these circumstances the store soon had to close down. However, a new opportunity soon arose.

Patriotic Hainanese relatives at Binh Dinh Market were investing money to open a hostel named "Quang A." They each bought a hundred-franc bond. I bought one too. Our relatives again appointed Dr. Xi as manager, Mr. Ca as treasurer, and me as accountant. Quang A Hostel was not large: it had only five bedrooms. The front of the hostel was used as a restaurant and to sell Western wines. The business situation of the hostel was very good at the start, but unfortunately it was badly managed. Dr. Xi hated Vietnamese people, but for some reason he was fond of an elderly old-fashioned prostitute and openly shackled up with her. She was covered with chickenpox scars and scabies. Even ghosts and goblins avoided her. Later she became his legal wife. They occupied one of the bedrooms and ate at the hostel without charge. As she was married to the manager the investors pretended not to know, but some of them copied him and competed with one another in openly occupying all the other bedrooms. They too brought in prostitutes to eat and sleep with them without charge for long periods of time.

So Quang A Hostel turned into Quang A Brothel. And Mr. Ca was still playing mahjong all day long. Whatever money the hostel made he took and lost playing mahjong. Quang A soon went bankrupt and closed its doors. No one ever mentioned it again.

There is another funny story about Quang A. Dr. Xi and his younger brother Mr. Han Hoai Nguyen were competing for the affections of the elderly prostitute I mentioned above. They argued fiercely. On one occasion the younger brother

chased Dr. Xi holding a knife. Dr. Xi ran for his life, but got caught in a blind alley and had to climb up and hide on a rooftop. It was pathetic and made everyone laugh and cry at the same time. This was a strange and rare event in the life of the Overseas Chinese community at that time. When I visited the United States in 1992, Dr. Xi's brother-in-law, Mr. Diep Nang Di, asked me whether I remembered that incident. He thought it was very funny.

Chapter 10. Chinese nationalist activities

On August 15, 1945, while I was still working at Quang A, Japan announced its unconditional surrender. China had won its eight-year-long war of resistance against Japan. China was now one of the world's five great powers. This was a source of great pride and encouragement to all Chinese people, including Overseas Chinese.

On August 19, 1945 the August Revolution broke out in Vietnam.

After the Japanese surrender, in accordance with an agreement reached among the Allies,^[1] China took over the north of Vietnam down to Da Nang while Britain occupied the south up to Nha Trang. Each was responsible for disarming the Japanese troops in its zone.

Between the Chinese and the British zone there was a "free zone" that was taken over by the Vietminh. It encompassed all provinces of the South Midlands from the southern suburbs of Da Nang to the northern suburbs of Nha Trang.

With support from the Overseas Chinese and taking advantage of the opportunity offered by the presence of Chinese troops in northern Vietnam, the Chinese nationalists of the Kuomintang sent many officers and specialists deep into Vietnam to spread propaganda and recruit Chinese people into overseas branches of the Nationalist Party and the Third Nationalist Youth League (or Third Youth League for short). Joining these organizations was very simple. Any Chinese resident aged 18 or over who wanted to join the nationalist party or youth league just completed and handed in a printed form and automatically became a member.

At that time it was considered fashionable and honorable for a young Overseas Chinese to join the nationalist party or youth league. So they were all very proud to follow the trend and fill in membership application forms. Members included Mr. Ngo Khon Dao, Mr. Ngo Khon Phuc, and lots of other people. Although they joined the party they did not really understand its political goals. They just joined for fun and in order to feel important.

I did not join the Nationalist Party because I was still under age. However, the party's local branch headquarters were at the Quang A Hostel at Binh Dinh Market. All party documents and personal files were stored there, so I was able to learn about their activities.

At this time Overseas Chinese Management Organizations (OCMOs) were set up in areas with a large population of Overseas Chinese as private administrations of the Chinese communities. The heads of these organizations were all local wealthy people. The Qui Nhon OCMO claimed the status of the main OCMO for Binh Dinh Province and took control of all the OCMOs in the province. The OCMOs used the power of the Nationalist Party to do whatever they wanted. They even insolently interfered in the affairs of the Vietnamese government. For instance, the Qui Nhon OCMO openly bought the support of Overseas Chinese. In some areas any Minh Huong Chinese or Vietnamese who contributed three francs were given identity cards showing them as real Overseas Chinese.^[2] People called them "local Overseas Chinese."

During this period the South Midlands were suffering from drought. People lost their harvest and were starving. In this situation Mr. Han Xuong Quang, the Chinese nationalist consul in Saigon, entrusted Mr. Lim Quang with transporting rice from Saigon to be distributed to Overseas Chinese families. Each family would receive 100 kilograms of rice. This was described as aid, but its real purpose was to buy the recipients' support.

The Nationalist Party also allied itself with the French colonialists and deceived the Overseas Chinese with lying propaganda. They secretly told overseas and local Chinese to stay neutral and not cooperate with the Vietnamese or join the Vietnamese Revolution or the Anti-French Resistance. Each Overseas Chinese family was given a Kuomintang flag and told to hang it on the rooftop of their house where it could be seen by the pilots of French planes so that the house would not be bombed.

Such behavior on the part of the Chinese made the local authorities and local people very angry. Vietnamese viewed the Chinese as thorns in their flesh. But they kept these thoughts to themselves and waited to fight back another day. This, for instance, was the situation in An Thai, a village with a mixed Chinese and Vietnamese population. Whenever Vietnamese residents heard French planes flying overhead, they climbed up on their roofs and displayed large Vietnamese flags so that bombs would be dropped on their houses but also on those of their Chinese neighbors. The Chinese villagers were scared to death. They were unable

to eat or sleep well. They prayed to the God of Heaven and to the Buddha to protect them and let them live in peace. It was very funny.

At the start of the August Revolution the Vietminh launched the "Public Education Movement" to teach illiterate adults to read and write Vietnamese.^[3] An open-air market was held in An Thai every five days. On market days local young men would erect string cordons along the roads leading to the marketplace in order to check whether people going to the market were literate. Vietnamese who were unable to read and write were forced to wear for a few minutes a sign around their necks saying: "I am illiterate." But illiterate Chinese were made to enter an empty house. When the young men heard French planes coming, they enjoyed themselves by locking the doors to the house so that those inside could not escape. The Chinese people inside the house cried out and screamed in fear. Some of them peed and shat in their pants. It was pitiable! After the planes had gone the doors were unlocked and the people were allowed to go. From then on the Chinese residents never dared openly oppose the Vietnamese.

These hooligans thought that it was great fun. What they did was wrong because these illiterate local Chinese were in fact mostly poor working people. The wealthy Chinese looked down on them, so they joined the Vietnamese Revolution and the Anti-French Resistance and made a big contribution to the glorious cause.

Notes

[1] At Potsdam in July 1945. See: Proclamation defining terms for Japanese surrender, issued at Potsdam July 26, Department of State *Bulletin*, July 29, 1945, p. 137.

[2] Although of Chinese origin, the Minh Huong were not regarded as "real Overseas Chinese" because they had been settled in Vietnam for many generations.

[3] It is estimated that 80% of the population of Vietnam were illiterate in 1944.

Chapter 11. Chinese Mother returns to the homeland

After father and my younger sister Thanh died Chinese Mother suffered greatly. She often cried and was very sad and mournful all day long. She also missed father's mother.

In 1945 the anti-Japanese forces finally won the war. Japan surrendered and peace came. For various reasons the majority of Chinese wives and their children returned to the homeland -- Hainan. Chinese Mother wanted to go with them. But with father now dead there was no money, so she made no definite decision.

On July 10, 1946 (June 9 by the lunar calendar) the family commemorated the anniversary of father's death. Friends came to pay their respects and asked Chinese Mother to return to the homeland. She was very emotional. She cried again and lamented her fate. When I saw her in that state I was very anxious. I understood her feelings and wanted her to return home, but there was no money so I had to accept the situation.

Then I secretly went to the house of Uncle Four U (Mr. Chau Duc Tu) and on a wing and a prayer asked him and his wife to lend me 100 dong. Uncle and Auntie were generous people and loved me very much. When they heard that I wanted to borrow money in order to enable Chinese Mother to return to the homeland, they agreed immediately. I was surprised and very happy. I was grateful to them for being so willing to help me. I often remembered them.

So I borrowed the 100 dong and went back home. I asked Chinese Mother: "Do you still want to return to the homeland?" She replied: "Yes, but there is no money." I told her that I could borrow it. She did not believe me. She thought I was just pretending in order to comfort her. Then I took out the 100 dong for her to see. I said: "Uncle Four U lent me this money."

She was overjoyed. She had the money! She and her daughter were now able to return to the homeland. She made a definite decision to do so. When mother and mother's father heard the news they were very anxious. They cried and did not want to separate.

That very afternoon Chinese Mother, younger sister Neo, and I took a bus to Da Nang. We stayed with Auntie Teng while waiting for a sailing boat to Hainan. We waited a whole week but no boat arrived. Our relatives told us that we must wait a while longer. I was worried that I might have to wait a long time, which would be inconvenient. So I bid farewell to Chinese Mother and younger sister Neo and returned home, leaving them to wait for a boat by themselves. They had to wait quite a while. At last they set sail, but their boat got caught in a storm soon after leaving the harbor. It floated on the sea for two weeks until all the severe weather had passed. Finally it arrived at its destination. Thanks to the blessing of Heaven and Earth, everyone on board was safe and sound.

When Chinese Mother and sister Neo reached Hainan, they learned that father's mother and Second Uncle were already long dead. All the belongings that they had left behind when they fled as refugees were gone. Chinese Mother was heartbroken. There was nothing left with which to start a new life. To make a living the two of them had to go down to the sea and collect coral to sell,

immersing their bodies in seawater all day long. It was very hard work. That was their life -- there was nothing better for them to do. They started to regret that they had returned to the homeland. They continued to survive in that way until Chinese Mother died in 1963. After that sister Neo got married and went to live and work with her husband.

After Chinese Mother and sister Neo returned to Hainan I often found some way to help them. Once I asked a friend named Mr. Three Ta (Mr. Three Hoi's son) to take some money I gave him to Chinese Mother, but on the way he ran into problems and was unable to give her the money. I felt really sorry. When I visited China in 1989 I met Mr. Three Ta and he tried to explain to me what had happened. For the sake of friendship I told him not to worry about it. Again I tried to send money to Chinese Mother through Mr. Hoang Duc Chau. He was also unable to get the money to her. He said that the customs officer had taken it all. That was the end of the matter.

Chapter 12. An investment venture with Mr. Second Quynh

After the return of Chinese Mother and Neo to the homeland, I and Mr. Au Quynh Hoa (Second Quynh), brother of my son-in-law Hoa, invested money in buying one ton of dried squid and took it to Haiphong to sell. At that time Haiphong was a free port. When we got there we found the Thai Phong Import-Export Company. The owner was from Ha Nam Province. When he saw that we had a lot of dried squid, he was very happy and gave us a friendly reception. He arranged for us to eat and sleep at his company and bought all our squid. So we had a safe place to stay. We toured all the sights around the city. At the end of our visit we bought ten drums of lamp oil (each drum containing 200 liters) to take home with us. We were very lucky because when our bus was just a short distance away from Haiphong fighting broke out in the city between Vietnamese and French soldiers.^[1] We were fortunate to be just one step ahead. We narrowly escaped getting caught in the middle of the battle.

When we got home the lamp oil sold out almost immediately. The price was very good and we made a profit, but we were still dissatisfied. If only we had used the proceeds from selling the squid to buy general merchandise instead, it would have been lighter and safer to transport and just as easy to sell. It would also have fetched a higher price and made more profit.

We could not make any further trips to Haiphong because the roads there were closed. We sold rice and dry corn for a while and then ended our collaboration.

After this I worked again with Mr. Second Quynh and Mr. Seven Xit. We pooled our money and bought a machine to make candles. For a while we made a good profit, but then we had to stop due to a shortage of raw materials.

I returned home and began working for myself. I traveled around Binh Dinh Province and Phu Yen Province buying cotton fabric wholesale and brought it home to sell. This too did not continue for long.

Note

[1] This was the first large-scale clash between French and Vietnamese forces, marking the start of the French-Vietnamese war. On November 26, 1946, the French bombarded, attacked, and captured Haiphong, killing 6,000 civilians. For an account of how the fighting began see Hammer, *The Struggle for Indochina 1940 -- 1955*, pp. 182-84.

Chapter 13. I work for Mr. Dan Loi

In 1947 I worked for the herbal medicine store belonging to Mr. Dan Loi (Four Ba Quang) at Binh Dinh market. At first I worked only inside the store, cutting and mixing herbs to make herbal medicines and selling them. Then Mr. Four Ba Quang entrusted me with the job of going places to buy herbs and bringing them back. Although there were frequent French air raids at this time, I was not afraid of danger and continued traveling to Quang Ngai, Thu Xa, Chu O, Tam Ky, Tra Mi, Da Nang, Vinh, Nam Dinh, and other places. As there was a war going on, merchandise was in short supply. If you could get hold of goods, you could sell them at high prices and make a lot of profit. So I made a lot of profit for Mr. Dan Loi.

Once Mr. Dan Loi and I went to Da Nang to buy herbs. Our goods truck had just left Dien Ban when we heard that the French army had recaptured Da Nang. It was lucky that we had left early, otherwise we might have been stuck there, not knowing when we would be able to get out.

Mr. Dan Loi ran a family business, so his wife managed the household on a very tight budget. At the beginning the workers' breakfast consisted of white rice soup with a piece of fish the width of three fingers. Later they received only white rice soup with salt. For a while they had leftover rice fried with fish sauce. Then, as salt was cheaper than fish sauce, Mrs. Dan Loi decided that from then on the workers would get only fried leftover rice with salt. Mr. Dan Loi's business was expanding but the workers' conditions were deteriorating. Although his wife treated the workers badly, he himself treated me well. He always let me sample some of the delicious dishes that his wife served him.

In order to build up his business and make more profit, Mr. Four Ba Quang offered the workers commissions to encourage them to work harder. At the start of the year he openly announced to the workers: "If you all work hard, at the end of the tax year I'll give you 10% commission, depending on how well each of you works."

We were all glad to hear that. The workers worked harder and I too did my best. I traveled widely to search for and buy supplies. I often wished that I could make more profit for Mr. Dan Loi and hoped that the workers would benefit from it.

The business was running very smoothly when suddenly, in the middle of the year, Mr. Diep Nang Tai -- a private tutor who had been teaching in Tam Quang Province -- arrived and applied for a job with Mr. Dan Loi. As he was old and educated, Mr. Four arranged for him to work as an accountant. Then another man, Mr. Han Hy Nguyen, turned up and also asked for a job. He used to live in the same village as Mr. Four Ba Quang and had come from China by boat. Both these men were very smooth and persuasive talkers. The workers called them flatterers. They flattered Mr. Dan Loi's wife and she liked that very much.

The end of the year finally came. Mr. Four Ba Quang prepared to distribute the 10% commission to the workers. Mrs. Four immediately objected to this. She thought that 10% commission was too generous. She regretted that her husband had offered the commission at all. She announced that each worker would receive only a small bonus -- the same amount for everyone. So the workers fell out with Mrs. Four and one after the other they quit the job. As she knew that some of the workers were aware of her flirtation with the two flatterers she just accepted their resignation. Mr. Dan Loi was very embarrassed. On one side were his workers and his friends. Together with them he had started the business from scratch. They had shared hardships and watched the business grow. On the other side was his wife. He did not know what to do. No matter what, he had to listen to his wife's opinion. However, he treated me with special consideration. Not only did he give me an extra bonus but he told me: "You have been a great help to me. I shall never forget what you have done for me and I shall never let you down. If later on you leave to start your own business, you can be sure of my help and support."

When I heard him say that, I greatly appreciated his good heart. To me Mr. Four Ba Quang was an understanding, respectful, and just person whose word I could trust. Later, when I did start my own business, he gave me a lot of help. He often paid me special attention. I felt very grateful and shall never forget him.

Chapter 14. Before and after marriage

After leaving employment with Mr. Dan Loi I came home and temporarily stopped looking for a new job. Instead I went into partnership with a Vietnamese friend named Mr. Nguyen Cuu Khoi. Mr. Khoi was well educated in Vietnamese and had beautiful handwriting, but he had no money. So I paid the startup costs and he contributed his labor and we opened a workshop in my home. At first I bought cotton yarn and we made wick for sale to candle makers. Then we bought a large engraved stone block, stamps, and other printing equipment. We printed calendars for sale and educational pictures to sell to schools. Our business did well. The revenue was enough to support our two families. Then I opened a Chinese medicine store and offered Mr. Khoi all the tools, materials, and technical books so that he could continue the printing business on his own. In 1975, after the liberation of South Vietnam, I returned home from Hanoi and paid a visit to his family. He told me that he had always appreciated and remembered me as the one whose help enabled him to become rich.

In 1947 Mr. Dong Loi's family were preparing to return to the homeland. He transferred ownership of his Chinese medicine store to Uncle Four U and Uncle Four U asked me to manage it. However, I already had a store of my own. I was still young and active and did not want to stay in one place forever, so I declined the offer. Uncle had to give the store to Mr. Au Quynh Trang, a cousin second removed of Mr. Au Bich Son. Mr. Trang was a playboy. He knew nothing about either business or Chinese medicine. Mr. Trang hired his cousin Mr. Six Khon to help him. Mr. Six Khon was old, weak, and an opium addict, and he too knew nothing about Chinese medicine. So the owner played with girls while the manager smoked opium all day long. They competed with one another to fritter away other people's investments. Whatever they earned from sales they spent. Within less than a year the store was bankrupt. Poor Uncle Four U ended up losing everything.

In 1948, at the age of 22, I married Ho Kim Anh, who was 21. She lived at Dap Da in An Nhon County of Binh Dinh Province. Kim Anh was born and raised in the family of a poor scholar. Her parents were very benevolent and honest. Her father was named Ho Toai. He was a Chiuchow Chinese. During the French occupation he passed the imperial court examinations. He taught private lessons at home (people called him Teacher Tu Second). His wife and he had a lot of children. Kim Anh was their ninth child. So their life was hard. He was to die young.

Although Kim Anh's father was a teacher, she herself had not received a classical education. However, her family had taught her to behave well. When she was young she was sent to live with the family of her elder brother and his wife to learn etiquette and earn some money. When she was a bit older she returned home to live with her old mother. She wove cloth for people and then opened a small home store in order to support her mother and herself.

Like parents, like daughter. Kim Anh was very good and honest. I tried to be like her. We loved one another very much. We shared hardships. We never argued. Kim Anh treated my family very well. She respected my old mother and loved all my sisters. She supported and helped me in many ways.

After marrying we built a straw house for ourselves in Dap Da. Kim Anh opened a home store to buy and sell small items. I traveled to various places to sell Chinese herbal medicines, collect orders from small stores in villages and small towns, and deliver goods to people's homes. I knew many customers from my time working for Mr. Dan Loi -- they all came and bought Chinese medicines from me. I did business over a broad area. I visited such places as Thiet Tru, An Thai, An Vinh, Phu Phong, Kien My, Dong Pho, Cay Bong, Cho Huyen, Canh Hang, Dai An, Quan Duong, Phu Cat, Cho Gom, Nha Da, and An Luong. Business was good and gradually I accumulated savings from the profits.

At that time Mr. Truong Duc Phu had a Chinese medicine store at Phu Ly. He was old and did not want to work any longer. He wanted to sell his store to me, but I thought Phu Ly was a small county with a small population. It would be difficult to expand the business, so I bought only his stock -- all the tools and Chinese medicines.

Soon thereafter I also bought all the tools and medicines from the Quang Loi Chinese Medicine Store at Phu Cat Market. I completed all the preparations and awaited the right moment to open a Chinese medicine store to earn a living for my family.

Chapter 15. I join the revolution

After Japanese forces defeated the French army in Vietnam,^[1] they set up military posts everywhere. At Dap Da a military training ground appeared in the old marketplace in front of the house of our mother's father. When we heard that Japan had lost the war and surrendered unconditionally, Uncle Two Du (Mr. Tran Trong) asked me to go with him to disarm Japanese soldiers. I was scared to death. Disarm Japanese soldiers?! Why, I might as well stick my head into a lion's mouth. The Japanese had real guns with real bullets and real bayonets. They had swords that could slice up a human being as easily as a banana. I dared not even look them in the eye, let alone disarm them. "Dear uncle," I told him, "this is too dangerous a job. I hope you understand." When he heard me talk like that he too lost his resolve.

Some time after the end of the war against Japan civil war broke out in China between the Nationalists and the Communists. Affected by the situation inside and outside the country, some local young Chinese -- for instance, Han Ai Sieu, Han Lan Dinh, Han Ngac Dinh, Han Anh Dinh, and Ngo Khon Phuc --

started to get involved in politics. While they were teaching at Phu My they happened to run into Mr. Hoa Hung, who had just been to Saigon and bought a radio. Based on what they heard over the radio, they started a magazine called *New Sprout* in which they printed the daily news and essays in favor of democracy.

However, the Chinese community at that time was under the influence of the Chinese Nationalists. Not many people liked the idea of democracy and some were even frightened of it. So this magazine was not popular among the Overseas Chinese and after a few issues it ceased publication. The editors then went their separate ways and looked for different jobs.

I did not yet understand what politics is about and did not join this group. Later I began to listen to Vietminh activists and other people with progressive ideas about Vietnam, the Chinese Revolution, and communism. I started to like politics. I was still engaged in business to earn a living, but at the same time I joined in some local activities. I took part in propaganda campaigns to persuade local Chinese to support the Vietnamese Revolution and the Anti-French resistance.

In 1948 Mr. Kinh Quang asked me to manage his Dan Huong Chinese Medicine Store at Phu Cat and help look after his family so that he could concentrate on managing his other business at Nha Trang.

I was his wife's cousin, so I told him: "I am glad to help you and I don't need any salary, but please buy me a bicycle so that I can go home to see my family." He agreed.

Besides his immediate family, Mr. Kinh Quang had nephews from various places living with him for schooling -- more than ten people altogether. I had to manage the business, take care of his family, teach his nephews, and still find time for my revolutionary activities.

During my time in Phu Cat I worked with Mr. Han Lan Dinh and the teacher Miss Tran Nguyet Dung to set up an organization in Binh Dinh Province called the Overseas Chinese Club for Democracy and Progress. We elected Miss Dung as secretary. I was deputy secretary. Then we split up into groups that went to different places in the province to conduct propaganda among overseas Chinese. Drawing no distinction between clans of different regional origin (Hainan, Trieu Chau, Phuc Kien, Quang Phu, etc.), we urged them all to abandon their old customs, unite, do their best, love and help one another, support and contribute to the revolution, and join the Vietnamese resistance to the French occupiers.

Mr. Han Lan Dinh and I were assigned the additional task of approaching the leaders of the Overseas Chinese Management Organization (OCMO) in Qui Nhon and politely demanding that they invite representatives of their local branches to come and discuss matters of concern to Overseas Chinese in the province. We were determined not to allow the conservative OCMO in Qui Nhon

to monopolize such matters. We also requested them to convene a delegate conference of Overseas Chinese in order officially to establish a general assembly of Overseas Chinese in Binh Dinh Province, elect its leaders, and so on. At the beginning our authority was still weak and we had a lot of difficulty. We did not get a good result but we continued to struggle against the conservative leaders.

While I was living at Phu Cat Mr. Han Lan Dinh invited me to join the Vietminh espionage network for Zone V. I did not want to do it. I was never interested in espionage. I considered spying an immoral occupation. An espionage officer has to carry a gun whenever he goes out and about. Although I may have felt proud of myself, I would have caused misunderstanding and quickly lost the sympathy of the overseas Chinese. It also seemed to me that a spy is like a slave who has to accept and carry out orders without question and use his power and position to bully people. I would no longer be welcome and might even be despised.

Note

[1] On March 9, 1945, Japan launched a sudden attack against French positions in Vietnam and replaced France as the colonial power.

Chapter 16. A struggle for power

After a while, in order to set up a single Overseas Chinese Management Organization (OCMO) in Binh Dinh Province, the Qui Nhon OCMO, also known as “the General Organization,” convened what they called a province-wide Overseas Chinese Delegate Conference. However, the delegates invited were mainly conservative notables from Qui Nhon. No one from outside Qui Nhon was invited except for Mr. Han Lan Dinh and myself, who were called “delegates of the young democrats.”

The conservatives at the conference openly appointed some Qui Nhon Overseas Chinese as heads of the General Assembly. When the new list of leaders’ names was read out, most of the delegates applauded to show their approval. Then Mr. Han Lan Dinh and I stood up and asked to express our opinion. We said: “What you have done is wrong. You have violated democratic principles. First, when you convene a provincial conference of Overseas Chinese delegates you must also invite delegates from outside Qui Nhon. The Qui Nhon delegates represent only the Overseas Chinese in Qui Nhon. They do not represent the whole province. Another point. The leaders of the General Assembly must be elected by the delegates at the conference and not just appointed by you. So you have violated the principles of democracy. Now we are putting forward a resolution to organize

another conference. We ask the Qui Nhon OCMO to take responsibility for choosing the place, date, and time of the conference, for preparing the conference, and also for sending out notices to every county in the province so that they can all choose their delegates.”

Our intervention surprised them. They did not believe that country people would dare oppose them. For them this was a rebellion, because for a long time all matters concerning Overseas Chinese in the province had been decided by the Qui Nhon OCMO and no one had dared protest. Now they were very angry at us, but they did not openly oppose our resolution. They realized that our view was logical and reasonable, so they accepted it.

The new conference took place in An Thai. This time all the counties sent delegates, some of whom called themselves “democrats.” But before the conference began the Qui Nhon conservatives met with the An Thai conservatives to hatch a plot to sabotage the conference.

If their people were elected as leaders of the General Assembly, they decided, then everything would proceed peacefully. Otherwise they would invent a pretext for a quarrel, beat up the county delegates, and show them who was boss. They also arranged for the children and relatives of the An Thai conservatives to gather outside the conference hall and demonstrate.

We were aware of their plot, so we informed the local authorities and asked them to protect us and ensure that the conference would go smoothly. They were willing to help. They sent the county chairman, county cadres, and militiamen to hang around outside the conference hall, secretly monitor the situation, and prevent any trouble.

When the conference organizers announced the result, the conservative delegates knew that their people had not been elected. They were very angry and upset. They confronted our delegates and yelled loudly at them, swinging their arms and legs in the air as they readied themselves for action. Meanwhile their children and relatives outside the hall noisily rallied in their support, creating a lot of confusion. Some of them broke into the hall. The county chairman, county cadres, and militiamen then stomped inside and calmed down the conservative delegates and their relatives. Seeing that the local authorities were involved, they dare not raise their hands against us.

The county chairman told the delegates: “You all came here for the conference, but you have not maintained order. You have tried to sabotage the revolution, stir up trouble, and cause problems. We request you to write a report of the incident for us to send to higher authorities.”

Then he ordered the militiamen to blockade the hall and not allow anyone in or out. When the report was written he read it out and asked whether anyone wanted to add anything. No one did.

For a long time this county chairman had hated the local Chinese conservatives. But whatever they did he kept his feelings to himself. Now he had the opportunity to pay them back and felt much better.

At first the conservative delegates thought that this was only an ordinary power struggle, so they did not take it very seriously. They could not believe that the county chairman was charging them with a criminal offense and sending the case to the provincial authorities with a view to their prosecution. Now they all realized how important this incident was and were frightened to death. But they were clever and had long experience. They immediately gathered to consult with one another. Then they approached the country chairman and offered their apologies. The conference organizer, whose name was Mr. Huynh Khac Thanh, and we county delegates urged that they not be prosecuted, but the county chairman was adamant: he insisted that he was going to demand their prosecution. We had only intended to scare the conservatives. We did not want the incident to be treated so seriously. The county chairman listened to us and finally gave in. But he said that he was still going to report the incident. He told them: "From now on please pay attention to the rules. You can't just do whatever you want."

"Yes, yes," they replied. "Right, right."

They had learned their lesson. Never again did they openly oppose us.

Chapter 17. The democratic movement among the Overseas Chinese

At about the end of 1948 or beginning of 1949 French troops came ashore at Tuy Hoa and Tam Quan. French paratroops also landed and occupied Phu My, Phu Ly, and Cho Gom for four or five days before withdrawing. I heard that Mr. Truong Duc Phu, his brother's wife, and her mother had all been killed by the French paratroopers in Phu Ly. I went there immediately in order to assess the situation. I discovered that Mr. Han Lan Dinh and Miss Tran Nguyet Dung were stuck in Phu Ly and could not get home. When I reached Mr. Truong Duc Phu's house, I found the three bodies in the underground shelter. It was a horrifying sight. It was clear from the wounds that they had been riddled with machinegun bullets at close quarters. Mr. Truong's body lay in a pool of blood. In one of his hands he was holding a Kuomintang flag.^[1]

The French paratroops had landed in Phu Ly on a day when the market was open. Besides Mr. Truong Duc Phu and his family, they killed several hundred innocent Vietnamese civilians. Corpses were lying everywhere. The stench stank to high heaven. I helped some local officials bury Mr. Truong, his sister-in-law, and her mother.

When the French army withdrew from Tuy Hoa and Tam Quan, it was found that none of the Overseas Chinese there had been killed but most of their possessions had been stolen or burned.

After these events our Club for Democracy and Progress spread propaganda among the Overseas Chinese. We appealed to them not to listen to the lies of the French colonialists, to abandon their tradition of political neutrality, to give active support to the Vietnamese Revolution, and to join the Anti-French Resistance. Only in that way could they protect their lives and property. Our propaganda had a tremendous effect. Many Chinese young people gradually distanced themselves from the conservatives, gave the Vietnamese Revolution their sincere support, and joined the Anti-French Resistance.

On May 1, 1950, at Dap Da, I became a member of the Communist Party of Indochina (later renamed the Communist Party of Vietnam). I felt very honored and proud. Soon after that several friends of mine, including Mr. Chau Vinh (Mr. Three Quynh), Mr. Au Quynh Phien (Mr. Ten Tap), and Mr. Au Quynh Hoa (Mr. Two Quynh), also became members.

In the middle of 1949 it was decided to establish a "unity center" to persuade Overseas Chinese in the South Midlands to give active support to the revolution and join the Anti-French Resistance. The unity center was under the supervision of the party committee of Zone V and under the direct guidance of Mr. Nguyen Thieu, one of the founding members of the Communist Party of Indochina and head of the Chinese mobilization campaign of the Zone V Party Committee.

Meanwhile the democratic and progressive groups in the South Midlands held their first conference. All the groups sent delegates. The delegates from Binh Dinh Province were Mr. Han Lan Dinh, Miss Tran Nguyet Dung, and myself. The delegates from Phu Yen Province were Mr. Tran Gia Loc, Mr. Trinh Cuong, Miss Thai To Tien, and Mr. Banh Trach (a younger brother of the well-known and experienced revolutionary veteran Mr. Banh Bai). The delegates from Quang Ngai Province were Mr. Thai Nhu Chieu, Mr. Tran Cam Tieu, Mr. Lam Vinh Quang, and Teacher Soa. The delegates from Quang Nam Province were Mr. Tran Quang Dinh, Mr. Au Duong Thinh Hoai, Miss Au Duong Cam, and Miss Ngo Ngoc Lien.

The conference declared the founding of the United Democratic Progressive Party of Overseas Chinese in the South Midlands of Vietnam and elected its first executive committee, consisting of Mr. Tran Quang Dinh (first secretary), Mr. Thai Nhu Chieu, Mr. Tran Cam Tieu, Mr. Han Lan Dinh, Mr. Tran Gia Loc, Mr. Trinh Cuong, Mr. Au Duong Thinh Hoai, Miss Au Duong Cam, and Miss Thai To Tien.

The conference made the following decisions:

- 1) When delegates returned home they should start to organize branches of the party in their respective provinces.

- 2) They should recruit new members and expand party activities.

3) They should prepare to celebrate Independence Day of the People's Republic of China on October 1, 1949.

When we -- the delegates from Binh Dinh Province -- returned home, we allocated tasks as follows:

-- Mr. Han Lan Dinh and Miss Tran Nguyet Dung were to organize branches of the Democratic Progressive Party in the villages of Phu My, Bong Son, and Tam Quan.

-- I was to organize party branches in the villages of Phu Cat, Dap Da, Binh Dinh, An Thai, Canh Hang, and Go Boi.

-- I was elected first secretary, with direct responsibility for all the party branches in An Nhon County (Dap Da, Binh Dinh, An Thai, and Canh Hang).

-- Mr. Han Lan Dinh and I were to take turns as organizer of the party branch in Qui Nhon.

The Overseas Chinese in the far south established an organization of their own -- the United Liberation Association (United Liberation for short). In Zone IV and throughout North Vietnam the Overseas Chinese set up the United Overseas Chinese Association (United Chinese for short).

Underground revolutionary organizations were also active in occupied cities like Saigon, Nha Trang, and Da Nang.

Thus in a short time there had arisen throughout Vietnam, including the occupied cities, democratic organizations of Overseas Chinese with different names but the same basic goal. The various classes of Overseas Chinese had united in support of the revolution and joined the Vietnamese resistance against the French.

Among the underground activists in Nha Trang were Mr. Ngo Nhat So and his younger brother. The brother was betrayed and killed by the French. Mr. Lam Van Tung, an underground activist in Da Nang, was also betrayed. He was captured and imprisoned by the French. In 1955 he was released as part of an exchange of prisoners of war and returned home.

Mr. Diep Bao Xuong, Mr. Diep Nang Trang, and Mr. Ton Nhon Hung were good friends. When they returned to the free zone they pooled their money, bought some Chinese medicine, and opened a store in Bong Son under the name Lien Sanh Hang. They used the profits to finance their political activity. They founded a periodical called *Dai Chung Newspaper* to make revolutionary propaganda and rally people in support of the revolution and the Anti-French Resistance.

On the night of September 30, 1949, all members of our Democratic Progressive Party were instructed to glue a handbill reading *October 1, 1949. China declares independence* on the door of every Overseas Chinese. Mr. Diep Nang Trang and I undertook to glue handbills in Dap Da and Canh Hang. In Canh Hang, after we had covered every house, we climbed the wall of Canh Duc School

in the Thanh Minh Pagoda, went through the dormitories, and stuck a handbill on the chest of each sleeping student. We were young and inexperienced: we did it just for fun, to scare them. But when we got home and thought about it we realized that what we had done was stupid and dangerous. If any students had woken up they might have thought we were robbers and beaten us to death. We were dreadfully frightened!

Our work in the Democratic Progressive Party had a great influence on the Overseas Chinese community in the South Midlands, both in the free zone and in the occupied zone. Everywhere you went you could see groups of Overseas Chinese gathering to discuss politics and hear them say things like: "The communists are the best!" The attitudes of the Overseas Chinese were changing rapidly. Previously the intelligent and educated Chinese had looked down their noses at the Vietnamese and at the young Chinese in small towns. Now they showed their admiration and active support for the revolution. Many young Overseas Chinese -- such people as Mr. and Mrs. Diep Phong, Mr. Diep Bao Xuong, Mr. Diep Nang Trang, Mr. Diep Bao Xuan, Mr. Diep Chau, Mr. Diep Mong Long, Mr. Diep Nang Duc, Mr. Diep Nang Dong, Mr. Thai Khai Du, Mr. Ton Nhon Hung, Mr. Tran Ngoc Ha, Mr. Truong Luong Huu, and Mr. Truong Duy Nhat -- left the occupied zone for the free zone in order to join the Resistance. Even those Overseas Chinese who were still against us in their hearts no longer dared oppose us publicly.

Mr. Diep Mong Long was elected secretary of the Democratic Progressive Party in the South Midlands and chief editor of *The Public Newspaper*. About a year later, on his way to carry out a mission, he had the bad luck to get caught in a French air raid and was killed. He had made a great contribution to our whole movement and his death was a great loss.

After the Democratic Progressive Party had been established for a while we started to organize an Overseas Chinese Youth Militia and send them south to Ninh Thuan, Binh Thuan, Khanh Hoa, and other provinces to conduct propaganda and set up a base. The members of the militia included: Mr. Trinh Cuong (commander), Mr. Thai Khai Du (deputy commander and head of the Qui Nhon Tam Thanh Group), Mr. Diep Bao Xuong (political officer), Mr. Tran Hong Hoa, Mr. Du The Xuong, Miss Vuong Hong Hue, Mr. Thai Tho Eng, Mr. Ngo Can Tung, Mr. Diep Nang Trang, Mr. Diep Nang Chan, and Mr. Au Quynh Phien (Ten Tap).

These people were from wealthy families. They came to serve the revolution, fearing neither hardship nor death. While militia member Mr. Au Quynh Phien was away in the south, his brother Mr. Seven Xit got into an argument and was beaten to death by a tenant farmer. Had Mr. Phien been at home at the time this tragedy would have been avoided.

Besides the Overseas Chinese Youth Militia, everywhere in Vietnam many young Overseas Chinese enthusiastically joined the Vietnamese People's Army and fought alongside their Vietnamese comrades-in-arms, performing many magnificent feats.

In 1950 Hainan was liberated. The Zone V Committee and the Zone V Overseas Chinese Campaign Committee gave permission for the General Assembly of the Democratic Progressive Party in the South Midlands to organize a Welcome Hainan Liberation Group to return to Hainan to congratulate and distribute gifts to the Chinese People's Liberation Army. The group consisted of nine persons: Mr. Diep Phong (head), Mr. Banh Trach (representing elderly Overseas Chinese), Mrs. Diep Phong (representing Overseas Chinese women), Mr. Diep Chau, Mr. Diep Bao Dieu, Mr. Ngo Nhuoc Hoa, Mr. Han Lan Dinh, Mr. Diep Nang Trang, and myself.

The members of the group sailed from Quang Ngai in four boats, three of which belonged to the Viet Thang Company. Mr. Banh Trach set off alone in one of the company's boats, carrying goods to sell in Hong Kong. Mr. Han Lan Dinh went in a second company boat with a manager of the company named Mr. Ton That Luyen (also known as Mr. Ngo Thanh Giang). Mr. Diep Nang Trang sailed in the third company boat with another company manager named Mr. Nguyen Duan. I had also planned to go on this boat, but before it left the harbor my wife Kim Anh went into labor (she was carrying our daughter Ai Nga) and it was agreed that I would stay behind and follow later. Mr. and Mrs. Diep Phong, Mr. Diep Chau, Mr. Diep Bao Dieu, and Mr. Ngo Nhuoc Hoa went on the fourth boat.

Mr. Banh Trach's boat had not gone far when it was seized by the French navy. The boat and all its cargo were confiscated. Mr. Banh Trach was arrested and imprisoned. Fortunately, he was not tortured in view of his age. He remained in a French prison until 1955, when he was handed over to the Vietnamese government as a prisoner of war.

Mr. Diep Phong's boat, helped by a favorable wind, had a smooth voyage to Hainan. But as soon as they had disembarked all the passengers were arrested by the local police on suspicion of being agents of the Kuomintang. Mr. Diep Phong had indeed participated in the anti-Japanese resistance in Hainan as an agent of the Kuomintang, while Mr. Diep Chau had been a cadet at the Kuomintang's Whampoa Military Academy. The passengers were sent to the Hung Long Prison Farm for Overseas Chinese. After some time Mr. and Mrs. Diep Phong were freed but the other three remained there. When I went back to visit China in 1989, someone told me that Mr. Diep Phong was teaching at the Haikou Teacher Training College. I went there to see him. He told me that after his return to China he had been continually struggled against.^[2] He had been accused first of being a special agent of the Kuomintang, then of being a rightist. He had finally been

rehabilitated but it was too late. Now he was retired and could no longer work. His wife had also been sent home and was growing rice. They had a daughter who was working at a factory.

The second company boat had drifted to Macao. From there Mr. Ton That Luyen was later allowed to return to Guangzhou to work, while Mr. Han Lan Dinh was allowed to go to Beijing to study.

The third company boat drifted to Hainan, where the police arrested Mr. Nguyen Duan and Mr. Diep Nang Trang and confiscated their merchandise. Later, with the help of military officials from Guangzhou, they were cleared of suspicion and released. Mr. Nguyen Duan was then assigned to the task of campaigning among Overseas Vietnamese in Guangzhou. Mr. Diep Nang Trang was sent back to Vietnam, where he worked as an interpreter and took part in the Battle of Dien Bien Phu.

Notes

[1] As the French were at war with the Vietminh and not the Kuomintang he must have thought that the Kuomintang flag might give him some protection.

[2] This means that he had been the target of “struggle meetings” at which people would have denounced him, spat on him, beaten him, and so on.

Chapter 18. I open a Chinese medicine store

After the birth of our daughter Ai Nga, my wife Kim Anh ran a general merchandise store in our house while I carried on an itinerant trade from place to place. Gradually we saved some money. We decided to open a Chinese medicine store. Kim Anh gladly sold some of her jewelry and put the proceeds into the kitty but there was still not enough. I borrowed some Chinese medicines from Mr. Four Dan Loi and Mr. Dong Loi but could not find good premises to rent so we were not yet able to open our store. Luckily for us, Mr. Nguyen Cuu Khoi had an empty house next to Dap Da Bridge. He didn't live there because he was afraid that the house might be hit during one of the French air raids on the bridge. He agreed without hesitation to let the house to us. Now we had premises and we immediately opened for business. I had many friends and acquaintances and I prepared Chinese medicines skillfully and packaged them beautifully, so we soon had many regular customers and were doing very well. Although Kim Anh was not highly educated, she was very intelligent and soon acquired a good knowledge of common Chinese medicines and how to prepare them. She helped me a lot and took charge of the store whenever I was away.

I also collaborated with Teacher Xi to manufacture all sorts of common Chinese medicines for wholesale distribution, including six god water,^[1] sore eye medicine, cough medicine, cold medicine, malaria medicine, supplement for good digestion, vitamins, medicine for women who had just given birth, skin patch medicine, and scabies medicine. Whenever any kind of Chinese medicine was in short supply I would find a way to supply it. In addition, I provided raw material for making cigarettes to various companies such as the Nam Duong Tobacco Manufacturing Company. Besides these ventures I produced tea boxes for sale. Thanks to my efforts at diversification the business grew very quickly.

During the first two years our store was bombed and set on fire several times by French planes, but each time I rebuilt it and the business carried on as before. Within about three years we started to make a profit. Mr. Dong Loi noticed the growth of our business and spontaneously offered us a spare house for a second store. With much help from him and some help from other relatives we laid down a firm foundation for the smooth running of our family business. We have always remembered Mr. Dong Loi and the other relatives who helped us.

Note

[1] Six god water, also known as floral water, is a herbal fragrance applied to the skin to repel mosquitoes and other insects, prevent heat rash, and relieve itchiness.

Chapter 19. The war against the French continues

At this period I was spending part of my time on business and part on public activities. I sympathized with my fellow Overseas Chinese, so when my supervisor set me a task I often found a way to carry it out that created as few problems for them as possible. The Overseas Chinese came to love and trust me. They elected me secretary of the United Chinese branch in Dap Da, with Mr. Dong Loi as deputy secretary.

Together with some young activists we started campaigning among local Overseas Chinese to open a Chinese school for children in Dap Da. People welcomed the initiative and willingly gave money and support. However, our budget was still small -- only enough to hire a principal and one teacher for about fifty registered students. So we encouraged young people to perform some plays to collect money. We also asked some of them to work as volunteer teachers. Quite a few of them were keen to get involved, including Mr. Tu Mau Tung, Mr. Au Quynh Hoa, and Mr. Au Quynh Phien. So we were able to establish a regular Chinese school -- at that time, due to wartime conditions, the only Chinese school in Binh Dinh Province. It functioned until the end of 1954. The students' parents

had the opportunity to meet and understand one another better, overcoming the old divisions between regional groups of Chinese.

In 1953 the French landed troops in Qui Nhon. The provincial police were worried that some Overseas Chinese might help the French, so they arrested Chinese in Qui Nhon, An Thai, and other places who were opposed to the Vietminh and sent them to an internment camp in the Central Highlands (although it was called a sanatorium). They also wanted to arrest some Chinese in Dap Da who were against the revolution and send them to the same place. I objected. I told the police: "These people only talk. In reality they dare not do anything."

The police agreed not to arrest them but warned me that I would have to be their guarantor. If they did make any trouble I would be held responsible. I agreed to be their guarantor, so no Chinese from Dap Da ended up in the "sanatorium." Elsewhere in our county, however, quite a few Chinese were interned, including Mr. Au Bich Son, Mr. Van Loi Hung and his brother Nhon Te, Mr. Han Phu Quang, and Teacher Soa in Qui Nhon and Mr. Diep Nang Duc and Mr. Sau Hoa in An Thai.

In Dap Da we organized an Overseas Chinese party group. This was a core group to mobilize the enthusiasm of local Overseas Chinese to involve them in local activities such as building roads, digging shelters, demolishing walls between houses to facilitate guerrilla operations, destroying bridges to deny their use to the enemy, planting trees, cleaning water, raising funds for famine relief, and participating in the literature and art movement. In addition, we organized a youth emergency response team to work together with local residents to help war victims, extinguish fires started by French bombs, and catch germ-infected insects dropped by French planes. All in all, the work of the Overseas Chinese party group really demonstrated the active support of local Overseas Chinese for the Vietnamese Revolution and for the anti-French Resistance.

At the beginning of the French war many residents of Qui Nhon evacuated to Dap Da. Overseas Chinese especially resettled and did business there. As a result, Dap Da turned into a large, prosperous, and densely populated city. People from neighboring counties came to trade and the local economy grew very fast. But it also became a principal target for French air raids. The planes came frequently, by day and by night, dropping bombs, napalm, and germ-infected insects, strafing with machineguns, and flying low over people's rooftops to shatter their spirits. There were heavy losses of human life and property and people were in a constant state of terror. The French methods of warfare at Dap Da were truly barbaric.

Our family store too caught fire several times during the raids, but we were well prepared and quickly put out the fires, so our losses were not very great. Once the French planes dropped napalm on Dap Da Stadium, just ten meters away from

our family shelter. We were inside the shelter at the time. Fortunately, the shelter was on higher ground above the stadium and we escaped unharmed. We were very lucky. Thank you, Heaven and Earth, for your blessing.

Mr. Dong Loi and his family were also inside their shelter at the time. They too had a lucky escape. A bomb landed just one meter from the entrance to their shelter, but the shelter was solidly built and none of them was hurt.

With such frequent and savage air raids, local residents had to work very hard at rescue and reconstruction. On October 1, 1950, French bombers attacked the marketplace and the Vietnamese school in Dap Da, killing and injuring many innocent people, including children. There were two Overseas Chinese women among the dead. Our response team of young Overseas Chinese got to the scene fast and rendered first aid. Local people were unstinting in their praise for our efforts.

When our young cousin Kham was at school and heard French planes approaching he would run into the shelter wearing a straw hat. One day planes destroyed the school in a direct hit. A bullet passed through the rim of his hat but missed his head. He was safe and sound. Thank you, Heaven and Earth, for your blessing.

After this air raid my mother's father was worried out of his wits. All day long he shook in fear, he was unable to eat or sleep, and he became seriously ill. When his house burned down in another air raid and all his belongings were destroyed, his condition grew worse and despite receiving a lot of treatment he died. We were all very sad.

Once the Binh Dinh Province Committee organized a conference for all members of progressive groups of Overseas Chinese in the province. I too attended. The conference took place at the Doi Tower in Qui Nhon. Perhaps someone had revealed the location, because as soon as the conference started a French warship off the coast began to bombard the tower. The bombardment continued without a break until seven or eight in the evening. We were all trapped in the tower and could not escape. Now and then we heard a fireball exploding over the tower. We were scared to death. We were all sure that this time we were doomed, but luckily no one was hit. On this occasion they only bombarded Qui Nhon but did not land troops. Had troops landed we would all have been captured -- no doubt about it.

I participated in revolutionary activities but I did not go underground because I was very busy with my business. Kim Anh and I willingly helped the underground agents and made their lives easier so that they could do their work better. Among them were Mr. Tran Gia Loc, Mr. Ly Minh Ky, and Mr. Diep Chan Khach, all from Binh Dinh Province. We gave each of them over 20 kilograms of rice per month (they received no pay at that time). That was enough for them to

live on, but they had no money to send home to support their families, whose lives were extremely hard as a result. We understood this problem and for a long time took care of the agents by feeding and sheltering them without charge in our own house, so that they could send the rice home to their families. At that time rice was very expensive and people in the South Midlands were starving.

We also often gave money to various people. One of them was Mr. Tran Quoc Anh, another underground agent. He had many children and his wife had no job. They lived in extreme poverty. He told us that he was going to sell one of his sons in order to get money to live on. It pained us to hear him say that, so we often gave him money to feed his family and advised him never to sell any of his children.

We also often gave money to honest and trustworthy friends such as Mr. Ba Quynh and Mr. Ton Xuong Nam to help them start their own businesses.

It was also during this time that Mr. Ba Ta, son of Mr. Tu Phong, came to visit us from Kim Son, a remote mountainous area in the far north of Vietnam. He wanted to arrange a wedding for his son Hai Quang, but did not have the money. Kim Anh and I gave him all the money he asked for.

At the start of the Anti-French Resistance War, Mr. Lim Quang, his wife, and their families had evacuated to Da Nang. They had opened a business there, but it failed and they went bankrupt. Then eight members of their families moved to Dap Da. When they arrived they had nowhere to live and no money to do business. Kim Anh and I gave them one of our houses, lent them some money, and gave Mr. Lim Quang my new bicycle so that he could move his merchandise around easily. He went on several business trips and used the profit to cover his household expenses and build up his business.

A really tragic story is that of Mr. Au Quynh Phien from Nha Trang. Mr. Au Quynh Phien had stomach ulcers. Forgetting that Nha Trang was still under French occupation and without informing the organization, he went back home for treatment. He also intended to ask his relatives to lend him some money to start a business. However, as soon as he arrived in Nha Trang his relatives informed the French police. They arrested him, put him in prison, and tortured him in many different ways. At the same time he was disciplined by the Communist Party because it was a violation of party rules for a party member to enter a zone controlled by the enemy. A few months later his relatives told his mother to bring money to Nha Trang to pay bribes for his release, but she refused because she did not want him to leave for the North. While he was in prison his only son, who was only a few months old, fell sick and died. After southern members of the Vietminh regrouped in the North, he was freed by the French and went home. But he was arrested again when the Ngo Dinh Diem government took over in the South. Mr.

Chau Vinh and Mr. Au Quynh Hoa (Mr. Hai Quynh Hoa's brother) were also arrested.

At the beginning of March 1954 the zone committee and Binh Dinh province committee organized a training course for leaders entitled "The New Situation and Our New Responsibilities." I was invited to take part. The course was to last over a month. Its goals were to raise the level of our political knowledge, help us learn from our mistakes, praise good work, and prepare our thoughts for a new stage in the Anti-French Resistance and for a new campaign to "reduce taxes and reduce profits." We should be ready to answer the party's call, engage in a new struggle, and fight and sacrifice our lives for the revolution and for the fight against the French.

At the start of the last week of the course, in order to check each person's progress, we engaged in criticism and self-criticism. You had to write a detailed account of your personal and family history, clearly describing everything that your ancestors did, going back three generations in the male line. Then you read it out loud, criticizing one part at a time. For example, my great-grandfather was a merchant. That meant that he robbed people, sucked their blood, and was a big swindler. We had to draw a clear line between the robber and the robbed, so that we could rise up to destroy the robber. After self-criticism the other participants added their own opinions, which you had to accept and approve. Then you graduated and were expected to organize similar courses for other groups.

It was very funny to see how some participants had tears running down their faces and mixing with fluid from their noses and saliva from their mouths. Their eyes bulged and they ground their teeth to demonstrate their sorrow and anger at the sins of their ancestors. A few people could not stand the stress and had panic attacks or even passed out.

On the last day of the course I heard that the night before French planes had bombed Dap Da. I was very worried and anxious for my family, but I dared not talk about it. I could only quietly hope that they were safe and sound.

The end of the course was declared at exactly midnight. We all dispersed. I set off immediately for home on my bicycle. The course had been held somewhere in the mountainous terrain of An Thai, a very long way from Bong Son. Being impatient to get home, I just headed south, ignoring the darkness and giving no thought to possible dangers. That was the only time I ever traveled a mountain road at night. I did not know the way, but I could see the road and followed it. I bicycled nonstop until dawn. By then I was out of the jungle but still saw no sign of any human presence. I kept going, not daring to stop.

About five or six in the morning I spotted a small village. I went into a house and asked for directions. I learned that I was in Phu My Province, not very

far from Phu My Market. I could hardly believe it. The villagers were astonished to hear that I had traveled alone along the jungle road at night. They said that I had passed through areas where tigers often came out to attack people and livestock. A chill ran down my spine and I regretted my rash adventure. Fortunately, the security situation had improved: no one mentioned any dangers. After taking a rest I continued my journey and arrived home about eleven in the evening. Everyone in my family was unharmed. I was happy and at ease. But as I recall this episode I am again really frightened.

A few days after my return home, the committee appointed me head of civilian support personnel for the An Khe Operation.^[1] While I was undergoing training, however, divisions arose within the Overseas Chinese community, so the leadership decided that I should remain and solve the problem. They appointed someone else to take charge of civilian support personnel.

Expecting further prolonged warfare, the local authorities ordered the destruction of all brick houses along Highway One^[2] in order to facilitate guerrilla operations by the Resistance. The guerrillas destroyed the brick houses of local Vietnamese as they advanced, but when they reached the big brick houses of the Overseas Chinese the residents, who were strongly attached to their homes, persuaded them to delay.

Mr. Au Quynh Phien, an Overseas Chinese member of the Communist Party, hastened to destroy his own house and called upon other Overseas Chinese to follow his example. But they were still reluctant to lose their homes. They came to me and asked me to beg the local authorities not to destroy their houses completely but only demolish the walls between the houses and lay mines inside the houses. They themselves would know where the mines were and take care not to explode them, but if French troops attacked and occupied the houses the mines would explode and destroy the houses along with some French soldiers.

I did as they asked and explained the matter to the local authorities. After thoroughly studying the proposals they accepted them. For the time being they stopped destroying houses belonging to Overseas Chinese and contented themselves with demolishing the walls between the houses. Soon after that the French were defeated at Dien Bien Phu and the war came to an end. At long last, after nine years of fighting, the Anti-French Resistance had defeated the invader. I was bursting with pride at the contribution that we overseas Chinese had made to the victory.

As for the brick houses of the local Overseas Chinese, they all remained intact except for the house of Mr. Au Quynh Phien.

Notes

[1] The An Khe Operation, also known as the Battle of An Khe, Dak Po, or Mang Yang Pass, took place in late June 1954 when Vietminh battalions ambushed a French convoy on the way to Pleiku. The convoy escaped after suffering heavy casualties. This was the penultimate offensive operation of the Vietminh against the French before Dien Bien Phu.

[2] Highway One, built by the French colonial authorities in the early twentieth century, is an asphalt road that traverses the whole length of Vietnam from north to south -- a total distance of 2,301 kilometers (1,430 miles).

Chapter 20. After the Geneva Accord

The Geneva Accord of July 1954 that ended the war against the French temporarily divided Vietnam into two zones -- North and South. The South was placed temporarily under French control, while the North was assigned to the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. Each side was to regroup its forces to its own zone. Two years after the conclusion of the Accord general elections were to be held to unite the country under a single government.

At first the Vietnamese party and government expected that the French side would strictly implement the Geneva Accord. Therefore only troops and a few very important officials were regrouped to the North. It was decided that I would remain in the South and carry out secret missions. But it was not long before massacres of old fighters and supporters of the Anti-French Resistance began at various places in the French-controlled zone, such as the notorious massacres at Duy Xuyen and Duoc Market in Quang Nam Province and at Chi Thanh in Phu Yen Province. Thousands of old fighters and supporters of the Resistance were massacred in a short time.

Leading officials then realized that all cadres remaining in the South were going to be killed by the French. This would inflict a big loss on the party. So they decided to move more people to the North in order to preserve revolutionary forces. I was one of these people. Other Overseas Chinese who regrouped to the North were Mr. Ngo Khon Dao, Mr. Diep Nang Tin, Mr. Vuong Qui, Mr. Diep Dat Thanh, Mr. Han Han Sum, Mr. Diep Bao The, Mr. Xa Nhu Hung, Mr. Diep Nang Nhung, Mr. Han Anh Nguyen, Miss Vuong Nhung, Mr. Diep Nang Chan, Mr. Ly Minh Ky, Mr. Tran Tu Le, Mr. Tran Quoc Anh, Mr. Tran Hoan Thong, Mr. Hoang Khac Thanh, Mr. Hoang Phuong Cach, Mr. Truong Du Sinh, Mr. Hua Thanh Truc, Mr. Lam Van Dinh, Mr. Thai Hieu An, Mr. Tran Tiep Kham, Mr. Anh Ba, Mr. Tran Tu Lap, Mr. Ton Nhan Hung, Mr. Ngo Khon Phuc, Mr. Lam Hong Nghi, Mr. Ngo Tan Dan, Mr. Au Duong Thach Hoai, Mr. Tran Quang Dinh, Mr. Diep Bao

Xuong, Mr. Diep Bao Xuan, Mr. Han Nam Vien, Mr. Han Tai Nguyen, Mr. Tran Gia Loc, Mr. Thai To Tien, Mr. Thai Tho Vien, Mr. Ngo Can Tung, Mr. Ngo Da Boi, Mr. Ngo Da Anh, Mr. Phan Chinh Quyen, Mr. Phan Chinh Giang, Mr. Phan Chinh Phuc, Mr. Phan Tien Huan, Mr. Lam Du Bin, Mr. Tran Cam Tieu, Mr. Lam Vinh Quang, Miss Vuong Hong Hue, Mr. Du The Xuong, and Miss Tran Hong Hoa.

Chapter 21. We regroup to the North

I received a notice signed by a high-ranking official, informing me that I should present myself at a specified assembly point on March 15, 1955 in order to regroup to the North. At exactly five o'clock on the morning of March 20 the assembled group proceeded to the harbor at Qui Nhon.

It was less than a month since my wife Kim Anh had given birth to our second daughter Ai Hoa. Moreover, Kim Anh's mother had just passed away. I felt deep grief at having to separate from my family at such a time. Although neither my mother nor my wife wanted me to leave, for the sake of the revolutionary cause I had to obey the official summons. I did not know what else I could do. We just wept silently together.

I departed feeling very worried for my elderly mother and for Kim Anh. My wife would have to look after three young children on her own: Ai Nga was then five years old and our son Trung was two. In addition, she would have to take care of my mother and carry on her business to earn a living. Another problem was that a family with a member who had regrouped to the North would definitely face reprisals of some kind from the puppet government or army. So I left most of our savings for the use of Kim Anh. I took with me only a hand-knit woolen sweater and a couple of keepsakes -- a Wyler wristwatch and a Parker fountain pen. I also left some money with my mother and with my sisters so that their livelihood would be secure during my absence, which I wrongly believed would be temporary. Then I exchanged sad farewells with my loved ones -- my mother, wife, children, and relatives -- and set off on my way.

Before I left for the North, Kim Anh and I decided to transfer our Chinese medicine store for the time being to Mr. Lim Quang. This would help him make a living and preserve the business during my absence. I thought that when full peace and security were restored I would be able to return and take back the business.

On the day before our departure from Qui Nhon I went to visit and say goodbye to Mr. Four Dan Loi. We stayed awake all night talking. The bond between us was very strong and we did not want to separate, but I had a mission to carry out. I could only comfort him and promise that we would meet again soon. The time came to board the ship and we bade one another a tearful farewell.

So early in the morning of March 20, 1955 I boarded a Polish ship^[1] -- a naval vessel disguised as a merchant ship -- bound for the North. On the ship with me were a number of other Overseas Chinese -- Mr. Diep Nang Tin, Mr. Vuong Quy, and Mr. Diep Dat Thanh. After two days at sea, when we were already off the coast of northern Vietnam, we got caught in a storm and the French navy sent a landing craft to bring us ashore at Quy Cao. As we approached we could see a crowd of people waving flags and banners to welcome us. Some people were beating drums and a brass band was playing. Moved by the solemnity of our reception, we burst into tears.

We were then taken to the Ninh Giang Reception Camp in Hai Duong Province. During the Anti-French Resistance War the French troops had burned down all the houses in the area and people were living in makeshift shelters made of straw and without walls. It was the coldest month of the year in the North. Mr. Diep Nang Tin and I were assigned a corner in one of these shelters. As new arrivals we had not yet been provided with coats or blankets and we had to sleep on a thin bed of straw. The next morning we had to walk 5--6 kilometers to another place in order to receive food and other supplies. Being from the South, we were accustomed to a very hot climate and had never experienced such cold weather. We had not brought coats with us, so we shivered all day and night. It was hard to bear. Luckily we did not fall sick.

At meal times we ate rice with stir-fried cabbage or kohlrabi and two or three thin slices of meat. The camp official who welcomed us told us that this was a special treat reserved for fighters returning from the front. It was indeed a special treat for us, because in the Midlands we do not have cabbage or kohlrabi. Cabbage has to be hauled by a long and difficult route from Dalat in the Central Highlands.^[2] Under the French only wealthy people could afford to buy a few cabbages to serve as decoration at the New Year. When they wanted to eat some of the cabbage they removed only a few leaves and sliced them very thin before cooking. Ordinary people never had cabbage. During the Anti-French Resistance War the road was cut and there was no cabbage at all. Later, when I came to Hanoi, I saw cabbages on sale everywhere at a low price. In the North cabbage was not regarded as a delicacy.

The next day officials came from the leadership to visit us, shape our thinking, mobilize us, and give us peace of mind. They asked us to stay and work in the North, take a positive attitude, and assist in the task of restoring the economy and building socialism. Then they gave each of us a little photograph of Ho Chi Minh, about three fingers wide, and a book of poems by To Huu entitled *Viet Bac*.^[3] These, they told us, were precious gifts from the party and government to honor fighters returning from the front. And we did indeed feel highly honored and were full of enthusiasm.

After we had been several days at Ninh Giang Camp, leading officials sent down an instruction to transfer all Overseas Chinese to Hoang Hoa Camp in Thanh Hoa Province with a view to sending them to China for training. When we heard about this we were very happy.

Before the regrouping to the North, the United Overseas Chinese Association had issued an appeal to Overseas Chinese in the South Midlands to send their children to the North, so that talented people could be trained for the future. Many Overseas Chinese responded positively to this appeal and were eager to send their children to be educated in the North. Among the children sent to the North by Overseas Chinese families at the end of 1954 were Mr. Dong Loi's eleven-year-old son Lam Dao Ngo, Mr. Tran Hoan Thong's son Ty, Mr. Nam Sanh's son, Mr. Bong Son's son, the younger brothers and sisters of Mr. Ton Nhan Hung, Mr. Truong Tho Xuong, Mr. Phan Chinh Le, Mr. Phan Chinh Chau, and Mr. Han Chinh Quang, Mr. Han Tai Nguyen's nephew, Mr. Duong Quang Ngoc, Mr. Lam Dao Trung, and Mr. Nhan Huong Lien. Some Vietnamese families also sent their children to the North at this time.

When we arrived at Hoang Hoa Camp, I immediately urged Mr. Tran Hoan Thong to go and find his son Ty and my nephew Ngo and arrange for them to join us. However, for a long time we could not find them.

After we had been at Hoang Hoa Camp for a while, leading officials decided that some of the Overseas Chinese who had regrouped to the North should be reunited with their wives and children. Among those selected for family reunification were Mr. Ngo Khon Dao, Mr. Tran Hoan Thong, Mr. Tran Tiep Kham, Mr. Tran Tu Lap, Mr. Truong Du Sanh, Mr. Thai Phieu An, Mr. Hoang Khac Thanh, Mr. Phan Chinh Quyen, Mr. Tran Quoc Anh, and myself. We were speechless with surprise at this happy news.

I immediately wrote Kim Anh a letter, telling her to prepare to come with the children to the North (Ai Hoa was now two months old). At Hoang Hoa Camp I had heard official propagandists say that communists do not use gold, that gold has no value to a communist, and that communists do not care what gold is. So I told Kim Anh to sell all our gold and bring the money to spend in the North, overlooking the fact that South and North Vietnam now had different currencies.^[4]

Kim Anh was overjoyed to receive my letter. Her wish had come true. She sold her gold and asked her brothers to accompany her to Qui Nhon and help her obtain the necessary papers. However, not wanting to draw attention to their family connection with the communists, they avoided doing so. Later, with the help of Mrs. Ty (the wife of Mr. Diep Bao Dong), she asked Mr. Diep Bao Toan to go with her to Qui Nhon to meet Mr. Hoang Phuong, who would know what to do.

On May 4, 1955, Kim Anh took the three children to Qui Nhon Harbor, where they boarded a Polish ship bound for the North. On May 6 they arrived at

Sam Son Harbor in Thanh Hoa Province. Since sending Kim Anh the letter I had gone down to the harbor every day to look for them. As soon as I got to the harbor on that day I spotted Kim Anh leading Ai Nga by one hand and Trung by the other and carrying Ai Hoa in a papoose. We were overwhelmed with joy. Husband was reunited with wife, father with children. I could not hold back my tears.

Arrangements were made for Kim Anh and the children to stay temporarily at a farmer's house. After they were settled in Kim Anh and I took our money to the bank, but the bank employees told us that they could not exchange it. Our southern money, they said, was no better than waste paper. These words struck us like a thunderbolt. My body started to shake and I broke into a sweat. What a blow! To work hard year after year, build up savings, and then suddenly see them crumble into dust. It was enough to make a person weep. However, we consoled ourselves with the thought that at least we were now together again. To serve the revolution -- that, after all, was the main thing. So we put our loss down to bad luck. We did not want to make a scene: in a revolution where no one had much by way of material possessions it might cause us a lot of trouble if it became known that we had money. Later we returned to the bank to discuss the matter with the management and they agreed to give us some compensation. It was only a small amount, but it was better than nothing.

The Hoang Hoa Reception Camp was reserved for Overseas Chinese from South Vietnam -- both from the Far South and from Zone V -- and for people from Cambodia. The people in the camp were divided into three "battalions," numbered 202, 203, and 204. Our Zone V cadres were in Battalion 202, Cambodian cadres in Battalion 203, and cadres from the Far South in Battalion 204.

Battalion 202 consisted of cadres who had truly participated in the Anti-French Resistance, employees of a government agency or company, and Overseas Chinese children whose parents had remained in the South and who had been sent to the North for education.

Battalion 203 consisted of a few Cambodian political cadres and people who had joined the Cambodian Liberation Army.

Battalion 204 had a rather complicated composition. There were a few truly active underground cadres from Saigon--Cholon, but all the rest were people of unclear origin. Among them were remnants of the army of the Chinese Kuomintang and people who had been imprisoned by the French for unknown reasons and were later exchanged as prisoners of war.

All three of these battalions were completely controlled by people from the Far South. They monopolized all leadership positions and did whatever they liked. No one dare express a different point of view because the people from the Far South had regrouped to the North earlier than the people from Zone V. They had been allowed to regroup to the North immediately following the ceasefire, while

our Zone V people regrouped much later. Moreover, the most important leading cadres from Zone V, Mr. Tran Quang Dinh and Mr. Diep Bao Xuong, had tuberculosis, so as soon as they arrived at Sam Son Harbor they were taken for treatment to the Hanoi Hospital. Less important senior Zone V cadres like Mr. Ngo Khon Phuc, Mr. Ton Nhon Hung, and Mr. Han Nam Vien, who had worked inside the United Association of Overseas Chinese in the South Midlands, did not consider it their responsibility to challenge the leading cadres from the Far South. They just let them do whatever they liked and did not worry about it.

The leading cadres of the three battalions at Hoang Hoa Camp were Mr. Trang Dung, Mr. Le Hon, Mr. Truong Khoa, Mr. Duong Kien, Mr. Tieu Minh, and Mr. A Cam. Only two of these six, Mr. Trang Dung and Mr. Duong Kien, had been underground cadres in Saigon--Cholon.^[5] Mr. Tieu Minh had been a cadre in the Cambodian Liberation Army. Mr. Le Hon and Mr. Truong Khoa had been exchanged by the French and returned to Vietnam as prisoners of war. I heard that Mr. A Cam was a member of the Malayan Communist Party who was pursued by the Malayan authorities and took refuge in Vietnam.

Because the Far Southerners controlled the leadership they took the largest part of the pie for themselves.

At first the Chinese Embassy had intended to take all Overseas Chinese cadres who had regrouped to the North to China for training. The leaders of Hoang Hoa Camp took advantage of this by immediately sending some Far Southern cadres to China. But when the Chinese Embassy saw how many Overseas Chinese had regrouped to the North they changed their mind and urged Overseas Chinese cadres to remain in Vietnam and assist in building socialism there. So it turned out that we were not going to China after all.

Once the situation had stabilized, the Chinese Embassy helped the Overseas Chinese in Vietnam by building the Friendship Hospital in Hanoi, offices for a newspaper called *Tan Viet Hoa* (New Vietnam, New China), a teacher training college to prepare Overseas Chinese teachers, and School No. 17 in Haiphong, which was mainly for children of southern Overseas Chinese cadres who had regrouped to the North. The leaders of Hoang Hoa Camp immediately took advantage of the opportunities provided by this situation and arranged for their own people to fill all the vacancies in these new institutions.

The cadres at the offices of the *Tan Viet Hoa* were Mr. Trang Dung, Mr. Thien Thuy, Mr. Dinh Luc, Mr. Truong Khoa, and Mr. Tieu Minh. Most of the cadres, office staff, reporters, security people, cooks, and other workers were also Far Southerners. Only a handful of people were from Zone V -- Mr. Thai Nhu Chieu (who had just returned from training in China), Mr. Ngo Da Anh, and Mr. Ngo Da Boi.

The director at the Friendship Hospital was Mr. Dang Hoan Ban. All other positions there were filled by people from the Far South.

The principal at the Overseas Chinese teacher training college was Mr. Duong Kien. The principal at School No. 17 was Miss Quach Minh Tam.

The chairman of the United Association of Overseas Chinese (Hoa Lien) was Mr. Ngo Lien. The vice chairman was Mr. Trang Dung.

The Overseas Chinese Campaign Group consisted of Mr. Ngo Lien, Mr. Thien Thuy, and Mr. Diep Bao Xuong. Mr. Diep Bao Xuong always followed the lead of the other two.

The enrolment of Overseas Chinese students from the South at School No. 17 was also handled in a discriminatory manner. Students from the Far South were admitted even if they were over 21 years old, while students from Zone V were admitted only if they were under 15 years old. (Our daughter Ai Nga was admitted at that time; she was just five years old.) The children who were refused admission could not swallow the news. They felt as though they had soap in their mouths. Heaven did not hear their cry, nor did Earth answer their call. Mr. Tran Quang Dinh and Mr. Diep Bao Xuong, as leading cadres in Zone V, had themselves appealed to the parents of these rejected students to send their children to be educated in the North. They should have taken responsibility for the situation and arranged a conference with the leaders at Hoang Hoa Camp to find a fair and reasonable solution to the problem. Instead they kept silent and ignored the matter, allowing the Far Southern leaders to do whatever they liked.

After a while the rejected students were placed at the disposal of the Labor Department and assigned to collective farms as laborers. Among them were Ton Nhon Hiep, Truong Tho Xuong, Duong Quang Ngoc, Lam Dao Trung, Phan Chinh Chau, Phan Chinh Le, Thai Hieu Quoc, Han Tho Nguyen, Han Dong Nguyen, Nhan Huong Lien, and Diep Bao Xuong. Later Ton Nhon Hiep was helped by his brother Mr. Ton Nhon Hung, who arranged for him to work as a bookkeeper at a collective fishing enterprise on Cat Ba Island.^[6] He studied in the evenings and was eventually admitted to the Agricultural University. There were a few other rejected students who also worked hard and enthusiastically and later went to university. The rest remained on collective farms until the country was united, when they were free to return to the South.

Some additional points need to be made here about the leaders at Hoang Hoa Camp who later became heads of the United Association of Overseas Chinese -- above all, Mr. Trang Dung and Mr. Diep Bao Xuong. Although they claimed to be working for the benefit of the Overseas Chinese, in reality they pursued their own agenda in cooperation with a cadre in the Overseas Chinese Campaign Group -- an extreme anti-Chinese element by the name of Mr. Le Doan.

The cadres of the Overseas Chinese Campaign Group did a great deal of harm to the Overseas Chinese. In the first period after the end of the war against the French, for example, every cadre, whether Vietnamese or Overseas Chinese, was permitted to go on a trip to visit his relatives. All his travel expenses were reimbursed by his unit. If he was visiting relatives in China, the Finance Department allowed him to purchase Chinese currency in an amount up to 100--150 yuan (depending on the distance to be covered). It was not long, however, before Mr. Trang Dung and Mr. Diep Bao Xuong, speaking in the name of the United Association of Overseas Chinese, proposed that the Finance Department allow reimbursement of expenses only for travel as far as the Vietnam--China border and that each person be allowed to purchase only up to 20--25 yuan. The cadres at the Finance Department told us that they themselves did not want these changes, but that Mr. Trang Dung and Mr. Diep Bao Xuong had repeatedly insisted on them until they gave in.

Mr. Trang Dung and Mr. Diep Bao Xuong also prevailed upon the police to impose restrictions on the right of Overseas Chinese cadres to visit relatives in China. A man was allowed to visit his wife and children every three years and his parents every five years. He had no right at all to visit his brothers and sisters.

The Vietnamese government allowed Overseas Chinese cadres and employees at state agencies and enterprises to take the day off on Chinese National Day -- October 1. The Chinese Embassy organized receptions on that day in various forms so that Overseas Chinese could gather together to celebrate the occasion. However, Mr. Trang Dung and Mr. Diep Bao Xuong proposed that the Chinese Embassy stop holding these receptions and that the Vietnamese government no longer allow Overseas Chinese to take the day off. Their hidden intention was to stop contact between Overseas Chinese and the Chinese Embassy.

Mr. Trang Dung and Mr. Diep Bao Xuong proposed to the top leadership that Overseas Chinese students no longer be taught the Chinese language. Fierce objections to this proposal came from Mr. Hoang Quoc Viet in his capacity as chairman of the Association for Vietnam-China Friendship^[7] and from the senior party leader Mr. Le Duan.^[8] Mr. Le Duan said: "Regarding cultural and educational provision for ethnic minorities, we are going to develop a special culture for each minority group. It is especially important to preserve Chinese culture, as China is an ancient civilization that has had a great influence both on the Overseas Chinese and on the Vietnamese people. In proposing to terminate the teaching of Chinese you are going too far! It could also harm our relations with China. We cannot accept your proposal."

But Mr. Trang Dung and Mr. Diep Bao Xuong took no heed and proceeded on their way regardless. They rudely told Mr. Han Nam Vien, principal of the school for Overseas Chinese in Hanoi, to terminate the teaching of Chinese to his

students. Mr. Han Nam Vien replied that he could not do what they asked because he had not yet received instructions from the Schools Department.

As this was a very important issue, with implications for Vietnam--China relations, the Education Department dared not decide on its own. However, Mr. Trang Dung and Mr. Diep Bao Xuong ignored all this. Mr. Diep Bao Xuong removed Mr. Han Nam Vien from his post as school principal and demoted him to the status of an ordinary teacher. The two of them even declared that the school in Hanoi had now been converted into a Vietnamese school. That was the end of the school for Overseas Chinese in Hanoi.

Next Mr. Trang Dung and Mr. Diep Bao Xuong persuaded the Schools Department and the Higher Education Department to institute the rule that any Overseas Chinese student who wanted to apply to go to university had to obtain the prior consent of Mr. Diep Bao Xuong. Their papers went first to him. The result was that after 1966 all children of Overseas Chinese, including children of Overseas Chinese cadres who had regrouped to the North, were no longer able to apply to go to university. Among those affected were the children of Mr. Ngo Khon Dao, Mr. Tran Gia Loc, Mr. Tran Quoc Anh, Mr. Tran Hoan Thong, Mr. Han Han Sum, Mr. Xa Nhu Hung, and Mr. Phan Chinh Phuc.

Other proposals put forward by Mr. Trang Dung and Mr. Diep Bao Xuong were that Overseas Chinese in Vietnam should be forced to undergo naturalization and that the term "Overseas Chinese" itself should be changed to "Vietnamese of Chinese origin."

Mr. Trang Dung and Mr. Diep Bao Xuong found many ways to make trouble for Overseas Chinese cadres with strong pro-China sympathies. For example, after the liberation of the South Mr. Trang Dung sent Mr. Diep Bao Xuong and Mr. Ngo Nhat So to Nha Trang, capital of Phu Khanh Province,^[9] in order to advise the secretary of the provincial party committee not to use Mr. Ngo Da Boi, Mr. Ngo Da Anh, and certain other individuals. The secretary immediately rejected the suggestion, saying: "Mr. Ngo Da Boi and Mr. Ngo Da Anh are our own local people. We have a good understanding with them. Whether or not we use them is our own business. It is no concern of yours."

Then Mr. Diep Bao Xuong and Mr. Ngo Nhat So went on a similar mission to Ho Chi Minh City. They advised the city party committee not to use Mr. Diep Nang Trang and certain other individuals on the grounds that they were elements sympathetic to the Chinese Communist Party. There were many other stories. I cannot tell them all.

I too was active in the revolution for a long time, but all my activity was at the local level. I never ventured out into the wider political world. So the way I see matters is very simple. I used to think that people who joined the revolution were people who dared to sacrifice their personal interests to serve the broad public

interest. I saw it as a sacred responsibility and a great honor. So I was ready to leave behind my kind old mother, my beloved wife and children, and my relatives and abandon my business in order to regroup to the North. Now I had left my home region and become a professional revolutionary. I was living communally with my comrades. This enabled me to see with my own eyes everything that they were doing. I saw that instead of serving the public interest they were often scheming to advance their own interests. Everything they did was against the general interest of the Overseas Chinese. They really were anti-people and anti-organization. They talked in one way and acted in another. All their talk was a lie. They used the name of the revolution to their own advantage. They worked together and at the same time fought ruthlessly among themselves for power. I really hated this situation and began to distance myself from them.

Notes

[1] Poland was one of the three countries, together with Canada and India, represented on the international commission set up to oversee implementation of the Geneva Accord.

[2] In South Vietnam cabbage can be grown only up in the hills, where the climate is cooler.

[3] To Huu was the pen name of Nguyen Kim Thanh (1920--2002), Vietnam's most famous revolutionary poet. Besides writing five collections of poems, he was head of the Literary Association for National Salvation and later held many important party and government posts. Before unification he was the official with greatest influence over cultural policy. Viet Bac is the mountainous region of North Vietnam that served as base and sanctuary for the Vietminh's guerrilla warfare.

[4] In 1946 North Vietnam had introduced the dong to replace the piastre ("franc") of French Indochina.

[5] Cholon lies next to Saigon and is inhabited mainly by Overseas Chinese. Saigon and Cholon are considered to constitute a single conglomeration.

[6] Cat Ba Island is the largest of the islands that comprise the Cat Ba Archipelago along the southeastern edge of Ha Long (Descending Dragon) Bay, near Haiphong.

[7] Hoang Quoc Viet (1905--1992) was a member of the second, third, and fourth Central Committees, a member of the Politburo in 1951--56, and chairman of the Vietnamese Fatherland Front from 1977.

[8] Le Duan was head of the party's Central Office for South Vietnam in 1951--54, a member of the Secretariat of the party central committee from 1956, a member of its Politburo and acting general secretary from 1957, and general secretary from 1960 until his death in 1986.

[9] Now named Khanh Hoa Province, in the South Midlands.

Chapter 22. Training for land reform

During our stay at Hoang Hoa Camp, we often went to help the peasants build dikes and do other work on the water control system. This work was very hard. Our bodies were immersed in water all day long. We had to dig and move soil. We were exhausted, but no one dared complain.

Half a month after Kim Anh and the children arrived at Hoang Hoa, I was told to go to Vang Market, near Duong Bridge in Hanoi -- the assembly point for a training course organized by the Labor Department. Participants were to be prepared for work on construction sites, work on restoration and expansion of the economy, and work in the countryside in connection with the land reform movement.

While waiting for the course to start, Mr. Diep Nang Tin and I were assigned to live in the house of a poor peasant family. We gave the householder rice and asked him to help us cook our meal. We had nothing to go with the rice, so we asked him for some withered ends of water spinach, tough as bamboo roots and cooked with a little salt. We ate like that for several days. At the Hoang Hoa Camp the food was not delicious but at least we had enough of it to fill our stomachs. Here in the countryside there was nowhere to buy food, so we had no breakfast and very little for lunch and dinner. We were almost starving. When the time came for the course to start, we were gathered in one place to live and eat together. Then we were again able to fill our stomachs, but we still got no breakfast. Gradually we grew accustomed to it.

Here in the North the standard of living in the countryside was very low and conditions very backward by comparison with the countryside in the South. None of the villages had a well. The villagers took their water from a small pond, which served them both as a toilet and as a source of water for drinking, cooking, bathing, and washing clothes. Animals also came to the pond. We were horrified. We knew very well that the way they used the pond was unhygienic and very dangerous, but

we dared not say a word because the organization had told us that we had to follow the “three togethers” -- eat together with the peasants, live together with the peasants, work together with the peasants. Thereby we would come to understand and sympathize with the peasants, forge a class standpoint, and prepare our thinking for participation in the coming land reform movement.

The main document that we had to study was entitled: “The New Situation and Our New Responsibilities.” We had two major new responsibilities:

I. Carry out the Three Year Plan for restoration and expansion of the economy, including the reform of socialist and private business companies.

II. Implement the land reform.

The aim and purpose of the land reform was to wipe out the oppression and exploitation of the peasants by the class of feudal landlords. This would be done by confiscating the land and property of the landlords and dividing them among the poor and destitute^[1] peasants, thereby implementing the slogan: “Land to the tiller!”

A. Organization of the land reform

The land reform was organized and implemented under the leadership of the Central Land Reform Committee (CLRC), consisting of general secretary of the party's Central Committee Mr. Truong Chinh (chairman), Politburo members Mr. Hoang Quoc Viet and Mr. Le Van Luong, and Central Committee member Mr. Ho Viet Thang (assistant to the chairman).

Below the CLRC was the Central Land Reform Team (CLRT), with Mr. Ho Viet Thang as team leader. This body was responsible for direct management of the land reform, including the assignment of detailed tasks.

Below the CLRT were the land reform teams for each province. Below the provincial teams were the area teams -- on average ten per province. Each area team had at least 100 members, guided by the area team leader.

The leader of a provincial land reform team had authority and responsibility similar to those of the secretary of a provincial party committee. A team leader received orders directly from the CLRT, bypassing the party committee and government at his territorial level.

Below the area land reform teams, a small land reform team consisting of 6--7 members was established in each village. The leader of such a team was chosen from among the poor and destitute peasants of the village.

The land reform team had absolute power. There was a popular saying in the North: "The land reform team first, the Lord of Heaven second." The local government was required to supply its files on landlord families to the land reform team.

B. The Land Reform Law

The Land Reform Law was promulgated on June 14, 1955. It contained five sections.^[2] The following were the main provisions of one section.

Confiscate without compensation all land and property (including houses and everything in them, livestock, and farming tools) belonging to foreign colonists and to dishonest, cruel, and reactionary landlords and divide it among the poor and destitute peasants.

Provisionally confiscate land, livestock, and farming tools belonging to other landlords, including landlords who supported the Anti-French Resistance and landlord-businessmen.^[3]

Confiscate without compensation land, livestock, and farming tools belonging to religious groups (Catholic, Protestant, Buddhist).

The categories of people who were to benefit from land reform were, in descending order of priority:

(a) poor and destitute peasants with no land or too little land to produce enough food for a family to live on;

(b) middle peasants, and also small artisans, peddlers, and fishing people, who could ask to be given some land so that they would have some extra produce to live on;

(c) parents, wives, and children of revolutionary martyrs and wounded soldiers.

C. Land reform courts

In every village where the land reform was being implemented a special people's courts was set up, with a judge who was assisted by a peasant representative. The judge was chosen from among members of the village land reform team. The assistant to the judge was chosen from among villagers who knew the personal history of the defendant and rented land or a house from him.

The land reform court had absolute power. It was responsible for passing judgement upon tyrannical, dishonest, wicked, and reactionary landlords as well as upon anyone who opposed or sabotaged the land reform policy, for settling land and property disputes, for determining people's social class, and for confiscating and dividing up landlords' land.

D. Stages of the land reform

The land reform occurred in stages:

(1) The preparatory phase (end of 1953--1955). The first experiments with land reform were held at the end of 1953 and beginning of 1954 in a number of liberated areas in Thai Nguyen Province and Thanh Hoa Province.

(2) The implementation phase (1955--1956).

First the rural population was divided into five classes:

(i) The destitute peasants were the poorest class. They had no land, house, livestock, farming tools, or other property. They also had no steady employment, only temporary jobs when needed as substitutes. Some supported their families by working as servants in landlord households.

(ii) The poor peasants owned a house made of straw^[4] and 1--2 sao of land (1 sao = 360 square meters).^[5] As this was not enough land to support a family, they had to work for landlords as day laborers or sharecroppers.

(iii) The middle peasants owned 1--3 mau ta (1 mau ta = 10 sao), which they tilled themselves. This was sufficient to support a family.

The middle peasants were divided into two subclasses: the lower middle peasants, who owned 1--2 mau ta of land, and the upper middle peasants, who owned 2--3 mau ta of land and an ox for plowing.

(iv) The rich peasants owned 3--4 mau ta of land and an ox for plowing. They had to hire temporary workers at harvest time.

(v) The landlords owned a lot of land but did not till it themselves. They supported their wealthy lifestyle by renting land out to sharecroppers and in many cases also by moneylending. The landlords were categorized as follows:

-- Ordinary landlords had 4--5 mau ta of land. They were not very rich. They had no criminal record as collaborators during the French occupation.

-- Powerful and cruel landlords were those who oppressed and exploited the poor and destitute peasants.

-- Reactionary landlords were those who belonged to political parties such as the Dai Viet Party and the Vietnam Nationalist Party.^[6]

The land reform team treated landlords in different ways depending on their category.

E. Procedure for the confiscation of land

In dealing with landlords who owned nearly two hectares of land, the land reform team had to find some way to bring them to court and destroy them.

Besides the main document on land reform policy, we also studied other documents such as the Model Report about the poor and destitute peasants who had been oppressed and exploited by the powerful and cruel landlords. The aim was to help students understand the deep suffering of the poor and destitute peasants. In that way we were led to sympathize with them and aroused to hatred of the landlord class, thereby preparing us for the fierce struggle against the landlords in the forthcoming land reform campaign.

Mr. Ngo Khon Dao and I sat together in the classroom. After listening for a while as the Model Report was read out, he became afraid on behalf of the landlords (this is not to say that he did not also sympathize with the peasants). Suddenly his face turned blue, his eyes opened wide, bubbles of saliva came out of his mouth, and he fell to the floor unconscious. I was scared to death.

As the reading continued, a number of Vietnamese students reacted in a similar manner. I heard that those who had such reactions were regarded as having a firmer standpoint than the other students.

When the session ended, Mr. To Lieu, chairman of the An Nhon County Council and head of the Overseas Chinese Campaign Office in Binh Dinh Province, came over to me and asked in a jocular tone: "Did Mr. Ngo Khon Dao really fall unconscious?"

"Oh yes," I replied. "It was for real."

"That's because he is a wealthy man himself as well as a landowner."^[7]

While I was on the course, the organizers of the Hoang Hoa Reception Camp took Kim Anh and the children, together with the wives and children of Mr. Ngo Khon Dao, Mr. Tran Tiep Kham, Mr. Tran Tu Lap, Mr. Phan Chinh Quyen, and other comrades, to settle in the town of Thai Nguyen.

Notes

[1] The term “landless peasants” is often used in this context. However, not all landless peasants were destitute because some residents who did not own land did own other valuable property (a house, furniture, tools and equipment for handicrafts, etc.).

[2] For a fuller account of this training course see Chapter 12 of Hoang Van Chi, *From Colonialism to Communism: A Case History of North Vietnam* (Frederick A. Praeger Publishers, 1964).

[3] Individuals who owned land and also conducted a business.

[4] Generally a single-room house. Straw was mixed with mud and inserted into a bamboo frame.

[5] Traditional Vietnamese units of measurement were still in use alongside the metric units introduced by the French. Land area was measured in sao (1 sao = 360 square meters), mau ta (1 mau ta or “native mau” = 10 sao = 3,600 square meters), and hectares (1 hectare or “Western mau” = 10,000 square meters). These equivalents of the traditional units in square meters apply only to the Far North of Vietnam; the sao and mau ta in Central Vietnam are one-third larger (Hoang Van Chi, *From Colonialism to Communism*, p. 81).

[6] The Dai Viet (Great Viet) Party and the Vietnam National Party (Viet Nam Quoc Dan Dang) were anti-communist Vietnamese nationalist parties.

[7] Although Mr. Ngo Khon Dao owned some land, he was not classified as a landlord because he lived in town (Qui Nhon) and was primarily a merchant.

Chapter 23. I work with a group of Chinese specialists

I was only halfway through the two-month training course when the government redirected me to Hanoi to work as a translator for a group of Chinese specialists attached to the General Trade Company. The specific task of this group was to help Vietnam build a new oil depot at Duc Giang and repair the Top Quality Oil Depot at Haiphong.

Also working with me there were Mr. Tran Hoan Thong, Mr. Diep Nang Chan, and Mr. Phan Chinh Phuc. Mr. Diep Nang Chan and I worked in the office translating technical drawings and plans. Mr. Tran Hoan Thong accompanied the specialists to interpret for them at the worksites. Mr. Phan Chinh Phuc interpreted

for officials in charge at the worksites. Our director was Mr. Hoang Quoc Thinh (he later became minister of internal trade^[1]). The manager was Mr. Nguyen Bach.

Soon after I moved to Hanoi, Mr. Tran Tiep Kham (who had also been sent to Hanoi) and I asked permission to go to Thai Nguyen Municipality and bring our wives and children to Hanoi. When we arrived in Thai Nguyen, we went to the reception center and met with the official in charge. We explained to him why we had come. He received us with warmth and sincerity. He told us: "Comrades, you have both been separated from your wives and children for a very long time. We have arranged 'happy rooms' where you can have intimate relations with your wives."

Hearing that, Mr. Tran Tiep Kham's face and ears immediately turned red. He got angry and said: "We came here just to see our wives and children. We are not asking you for *that*. What do you think -- that we came here to satisfy our urges?"

The official looked as though a bucket of cold water had been poured over his head and he had not had time to wipe his face. He dared not say a word and quickly disappeared. He did not come back. As for me, I found the exchange really funny. I laughed until I cried.

When Kim Anh and the children arrived at Thai Nguyen Municipality, it had been arranged for them to stay temporarily with the family of an official. Thai Nguyen is in a mountainous area; the weather was very hot and living conditions were poor. Not yet being accustomed to the mountain water, all of the children had fallen sick. Ai Nga had sore eyes. Both her eyes were red like fire. Trung's body was covered with boils. There was a big boil the size of an egg on his neck. Ai Hoa was still only a few months old. She could not bear the heat and cried and screamed all day and night. Kim Anh had never lived in such hard conditions before. She was starting to wilt. I really felt sorry for her.

Kim Anh and I were very worried. We could only sob. I could not bear to leave her and the children there to suffer any longer. I wanted to take them with me to Hanoi right away, but how would I arrange it? I was still confused and had no clear plan. The North was a strange land for us. We had no relatives or old friends there to help us. I would need to rent a house, but we had very little money.

Fortunately, Heaven took pity on us. Regardless of difficulties, I decided to bring the family to Hanoi right away. We stayed for a few days at a hotel on Hang Dau Street, next to the Long Bien Bridge. The couple who owned the hotel were honest and benevolent. Seeing that we had three young children, they were very understanding and helpful. They told us they had a house they could rent to us at 81 Hang Bot Street. The rent was reasonable. I was very happy to hear that. I immediately thanked them and we rented the house. So from then on we resided at 81 Hang Bot Street, Hanoi.

The house had a main room about 12 square meters in area, a kitchen, a toilet, a front garden, and a courtyard with washing facilities. It was very conveniently located. And it was clean.

After we moved in, I began to look for my friend's son Ngo. It took me a while to find him. I brought him to our house. As he too was unaccustomed to the water and the poor living conditions, he had rashes all over his body and his clothes were stained with pus and blood. It was pitiful! He was from a wealthy family, only eleven years old, and already separated from his parents, brothers, and sisters, suffering far away from home in the North.

Kim Anh loved Ngo very much. She cared for him as though he were her own child. She bathed him two or three times a day and filled his stomach with tasty food. Soon he was cured, chubby, and healthy. Then we sent him to attend School No. 17 in Haiphong. From then on he was always in good health and did well at his studies. Later he was chosen as an honor student and sent to Tsinghua University in Beijing. For over a year he studied automotive engineering. Then the Cultural Revolution broke out and the Vietnamese government ordered him to return to Vietnam. He continued his studies at Bach Khoa University in Hanoi. Upon graduation he was invited by the university to stay on and teach. But he had never wanted to be a teacher, so he excused himself by claiming that he could not teach because he spoke with a stutter. Then he was assigned to work in the field of water resource management in a remote place near the border with Laos. When he received the notification he was very perplexed and came to inform us. I immediately went to the Ministry of Higher Education and requested them to assign him a post near Hanoi. They agreed and sent him instead to Hung Yen on the outskirts of Hanoi.

As Ngo was a very good worker, his director wanted him to join the Communist Party and asked me to complete the application form for him. However, the political situation at that time was very complicated, so I advised him not to join the party.^[2] I told him to do his best in his professional field. That would be good enough. From then on his director often reminded him to join the party but he never did.

So our family was settled in Hanoi. Mr. Ngo Khon Dao was less fortunate: he had not yet been assigned a post there. He noticed that I had a job and my family a home in Hanoi. So he begged us to allow him and his family to move in with us for the time being. When he was assigned a post they would find a different house and move out.

As he was a comrade and a compatriot and as we sympathized with his situation, we were happy for them to move in with us and told him not to worry. So Mr. Ngo Khon Dao and his family shared the house with us. Altogether we were ten people -- five of us and five of them -- crowded together in a small room. It

was very cramped and embarrassing. But we lived happily. Soon Mr. Ngo Khon Dao got a job at a gasoline station in Hanoi, but he and his family continued to live with us.

I worked with the group of Chinese specialists for about a year. The new oil depot at Duc Giang had now been built and the Top Quality Oil Depot at Haiphong had been repaired. The group had completed its task.

The General Trade Company originally came under the Ministry of Economic Management. Soon, however, this ministry was divided into two -- the Ministry of Industry and the Ministry of Trade. The Ministry of Industry was placed in charge of the oil depots, so for a short period I found myself working for that ministry. The Ministry of Industry wanted to keep me, but the Ministry of Trade refused to release me. They were fighting over me. Eventually I was assigned to the Ministry of Trade.

During the time when I was working with the group of Chinese specialists, every Saturday the parliament welcomed visitors and newly arrived specialists from various countries. We were invited to accompany them as interpreters. Chairman Ho Chi Minh also came on these occasions. We met him and felt highly honored.

Notes

[1] Hoang Quoc Thinh (1911--2009) was minister of internal trade from 1967 to 1977.

[2] The application form for joining the party requires detailed information about the applicant's family background. Applying to join would have drawn attention to his 'bad' class origin.

Chapter 24. At the General Export-Import Company. Land reform and its aftermath. Visit to Hainan. Search for housing

When I returned to the Ministry of Trade it was undergoing further division into two ministries -- the Ministry of Internal Trade and the Ministry of Foreign Trade. I was assigned to the planning office of the General Import-Export Company under the Ministry of Foreign Trade. At the time this was the only company belonging to the Ministry of Foreign Trade. The director of the company was Mr. Nguyen Quoc Thai and the planning office was headed by Mr. Bui Khon.

Land reform

This was the time when the land reform in North Vietnam was entering its most decisive phase. I was not directly involved in the land reform, but the struggles of the peasants against the landlords in the rural counties surrounding Hanoi intermittently intensified and then the managements of all enterprises and organizations mobilized their workers, employees, and cadres to participate in support of the peasants in order to implant in us a class viewpoint. Through our participation we learned more about the methods used in the campaign.

First the land reform team for a specific village struck roots among the poor and destitute peasants, developed sympathy with them, and won their trust by practicing the “three together.” Then the team members encouraged and stimulated them to stand up and denounce their old landlords. On the basis of these denunciations the team members arrested the accused landlords and imprisoned them in the house of a poor peasant. Their relatives were forbidden to see them, and could send them food and drink only through a member of the land reform team. So the landlords were isolated from the start. Their relatives were also placed under house arrest and not allowed to contact anyone. Any children of the accused landlords who were still at school were expelled.

Before an accused landlord was taken to the special land reform court for trial, the team members forced him to memorize the answers to the questions that the judge would ask him. The witnesses were also made to memorize their answers.

The next day the court sent summonses to everyone in the village -- old and young, male and female -- to attend the court on the specified date.

When the accused was led before the court on the day of his trial, his hands were tied behind his back. He was made to kneel and bow his head in front of the judge. There was no defense lawyer for him. In response to the judge's questions, the witnesses and any other peasants who wanted to give testimony stood and addressed the court (this was also called “speaking bitterness”). They denounced not only the accused but also his father, grandfather, and other ancestors. As they spoke they continually spat in the face of the accused and insulted, kicked, and punched him. A daughter-in-law might even insult her parents-in-law or a child his own parents.

When the “speaking bitterness” was finished, the judge and his assistant stood up and on the basis of the testimony pronounced the verdict in front of the angry peasants. No matter what, the accused was always found guilty. He was not allowed to speak in his own defense. He had to stay silent. If he did try to speak, then the team members started shouting the slogan “Down with the stubborn landlord!” and the crowd joined in. The noise of their shouting echoed in Heaven and shook the Earth. Terrified and shaking, the accused fell silent. He could only bow his head and acknowledge his guilt.

It was in this tense atmosphere, charged with anger and hatred, that the judge pronounced the verdict that had been approved in advance by the land reform team. The team members and the soldiers and militiamen guarding them held their guns up high and loudly repeated the judge's words to show their agreement. All those in attendance joined in, waving their fists up and down in the air as they shouted. Then the judge confirmed the verdict.

Some landlords, knowing what awaited them, put an end to it all and took their own lives on the day before their trial. They did not want to undergo torture or face public disgrace.

The sentence imposed on a condemned landlord was often very heavy. It depended on the situation in the province concerned and on the landlord's class category and activities.

Condemned landlords who owed debts of blood or who were reactionaries or traitors to the county were executed.

Also tried were the widows and children of dead landlords who had been powerful, deceitful, and cruel or spies for the French or who had collaborated with the colonial regime as village chief, hamlet chief, or village mayor or in some other capacity. All their property was confiscated and they were ostracized. Given their family history, they could not find suitable jobs whatever they did.

Some landlords had in the past been reactionaries, betrayed the country, or belonged to parties such as the Dai Viet Party or the Vietnam National Party but had later joined the Resistance and contributed to the struggle for independence. Some of them were now high-ranking officials in the government or high-ranking officers in the People's Army. The land reform team would submit a special request for such a person to be sent back to his original home province for trial.

Other landlords, including those who were members of the Vietnam Workers' Party, were sentenced to undergo "re-education" in a prison camp. This meant a term of 5--20 years or longer.

Death sentences were executed immediately, before the open court. On the orders of the head of the land reform team, a grave had already been dug and other necessary preparations made.

Many different methods of execution were used in different places:

-- shooting;

-- burial alive;

-- beheading;

-- placing the condemned person in a big bamboo basket with hands tied behind his back and submerging the basket into the village pond;

-- tying the condemned person to a pole that had been stuck into the ground up on a hill and leaving him to die of hunger, thirst, and exposure.

After the verdict was pronounced, the condemned person's family was immediately kicked out of their house. All their property, including land, house, rice, livestock, and farming tools, was confiscated and distributed among the poor and destitute peasants.

Results of land reform

As a result of the first four stages of the land reform, 800,000 hectares of land, 100,000 working oxen, and 150,000 rooms of housing were confiscated from powerful, deceitful, and cruel landlords and from landlords who were reactionaries or traitors and distributed among 200,000 poor and destitute peasant families.

Also as a result of the first four stages of the land reform, according to incomplete data, about 100,000 people were killed and another 40,000 placed in “re-education” camps where they were mistreated.

During the fifth stage of the land reform, about 100,000 more people were killed, including 40,000 cadres and members of the Communist Party. According to classified government documents, 15,000 cadres were killed unjustifiably.

Causes of the errors

According to the instructions issued by the party Central Committee and by the Central Land Reform Committee, at least 15% of landlords were to be liquidated in each province. This quota was very difficult to reach because the number of landlords in reality was smaller than the number assumed in the instructions. Population pressure on the land was very strong in North Vietnam. By family tradition a father bequeathed his land to his sons in equal portions, thereby dividing one large family holding into several small family holdings. As a result, the amount of land owned by the majority of peasants was less than 3 native hectares.

[1]

In order to satisfy higher officials that the quota had been achieved, however, all that the land reform teams needed to do was to adjust the standards for defining classes or introduce new standards (this, of course, required the agreement of the Center). The new or adjusted standards had the intended effect of

raising some rich peasants and even some middle peasants into the landlord class. Then they could be struck down. If necessary this procedure could be repeated.

Seeing what was happening and fearing that they too would be reclassified and mistreated like landlords, some rich and middle peasants stuck together and closely cooperated with the land reform team. They were more than willing to give false testimony against any accused person, even if they had never seen him before. Losing all sense of right and wrong, they were willing to denounce their parents, their brothers and sisters, or their good friends.

The result everywhere was that some rich peasants, middle peasants, and even poor peasants with little land were struck down. Members of land reform teams warned that there were reactionary elements everywhere: they had even crept into the party in order to destroy it from within. So party members were also struck down in large numbers, almost destroying the foundation of the party.

And so the land reform teams struck and killed on a large scale. The whole country descended into chaos. People were gripped with fear day and night. They could not eat or sleep well.

In late 1955 and in 1956 there were altogether five more surges in the land reform campaign, each one fiercer and more terrible than the last. The fifth surge came in the middle of 1956 and was the most vicious of them all, especially in Nghe Tinh Province.^[2] The victims included not only rich and middle peasants but also cadres and others who had joined the party as early as 1930 or the Society of Young Comrades during the period 1922--1926.^[3] Many managers at our General Import-Export Company were also sent back to their home provinces for trial by the land reform teams. One of them was Mr. Nguyen Dai, a provincial delegate in Nghe An Province and head of the company's personnel department, who narrowly escaped beheading.

Absurdly, even the parents of Mr. Truong Chinh himself were put on trial by a land reform team. They fainted during the trial and were crippled by the beatings that they received.

Nor was Mr. Truong Chinh the only one of the top leaders to be affected personally by the land reform campaign. Mr. Hoang Quoc Viet happened to be in hospital for treatment at the time. For security reasons the hospital staff had not been told who he was. One day he overheard a member of the hospital staff say: "We must also drag this old man out and put him on trial." He was scared to death. Could low-level staff really threaten someone of his stature? Could he himself be arrested? He immediately escaped home and reported the incident to the party Central Committee, the Central Land Reform Committee, and Chairman Ho Chi Minh. That was how the top leadership discovered that everywhere in the North the land reform teams were out of control and committing serious errors.

Too many peasants, too many relatives of cadres and party members were wrongly accused or sent to “re-education camps.” They suffered insult and mistreatment. In several provinces people showed their anger and organized to fight back. The first uprising started in Nghe Tinh Province, where members of land reform teams and people who had made false accusations were killed. This caused even more chaos and insecurity in society.

In order to assuage the dissatisfaction with land reform among cadres and party members as well as the majority of peasants, and to heal people's hearts, on July 1, 1956, during a conference to sum up the results of the campaign, Chairman Ho Chi Minh sent out letters to cadres openly admitting the errors made and declaring that the Central Committee of the party had carried out self-criticism. He also issued detailed instructions about how to correct errors and prove one's innocence. Mr. Truong Chinh had to resign as party general secretary. Mr. Hoang Quoc Viet and Mr. Le Van Luong were removed from the Politburo and Mr. Le Van Luong lost his position as head of the Organization Department of the Central Committee. Mr. Ho Viet Thang was dropped from the Central Committee. Finally, in November 1956 Chairman Ho Chi Minh spoke on Hanoi Radio and openly apologized to the nation.

Aftermath of land reform

In late 1956 and continuing into 1957, there was a “prove innocence, correct errors” campaign to restore the honor of wrongly accused cadres and party members and their families. Wrongly accused cadres and party members were restored to their old ranks. People who had been wrongly expelled from the party were readmitted and restored to their old ranks. Party members who had been wrongly executed or had died in “re-education camps” were honored as patriotic martyrs whose lives had been sacrificed to the revolutionary cause. This honor was inscribed in the personal histories of their family members. Their siblings and children, now regarded as belonging to the families of revolutionary martyrs, were given priority in assignment to higher education and to government jobs.

The families of wrongly executed landlords received symbolic compensation in the form of a small plot of land that was just sufficient for them to live on. They were reclassified as “ordinary” or “other” landlords and given full civil rights. This helped protect them against discrimination and renewed isolation. Later, after the collectivization of agriculture, they were allowed to join collective farms.

So the chaos created by the land reform in Heaven and on Earth gradually subsided, but complete security did not return. The situation remained difficult. Some wrongly accused cadres and party members and their families were still dissatisfied. Taking advantage of the “correct errors” campaign, they worked

together by various means to oppose the party and government leadership. Among the writers, musicians, and artists whose activities attracted public attention were the members of the *Van Nhan -- Giai Pham (Humanism and Masterpieces)* group. They openly published newspapers and magazines such as *Arts and Letters*, *Humanism*, and *Masterpieces* and handed out several leaflets criticizing party policy and the party leaders. They also incited interpreters and translators to rise up and demonstrate against the party and government leadership.

In addition, they incited some southern students to roam around Hanoi and pick arguments and fights with northern students, other residents, and the police. These students burned down houses, committed armed robberies, and occupied police stations.

So the situation throughout North Vietnam and especially in Hanoi was chaotic and noisy. It looked as though a big storm was brewing. It was a real headache.

The party and government leadership immediately took steps to put an end to the chaos, using both soft and hard methods.

Against the *Van Nhan -- Giai Pham* group the authorities used tough methods. The publication of reactionary books, newspapers, and magazines was banned and those already published were confiscated. The ringleaders who had caused the trouble were arrested and severely punished.

To deal with the southern students among the troublemakers the authorities mobilized a large number of southern students from School No. 17 to confront them. Among the students mobilized were Lam Dao Ngo, A Ty, Ngo Da Thuy, Ly Hoai Trung, and Dam Bich Hang. People said that these students knew martial arts and looked very rough and fierce. When the troublemakers heard that students from School No. 17 were looking for them they were very frightened and dared not commit any more crimes.

To interpreters and translators leading officials applied a policy of persuasion, working with them one on one to advise them and mold their thought. If they had a problem or request they were urged to sort it out with their unit leader but not to bring any conflict out into the open. The leadership used soft methods because they knew that interpreters and translators were mostly children of high-ranking cadres. During the Anti-French Resistance the government had sent them to study abroad and now they had returned. It would have been unwise to apply hard methods to them because if they took offence they would join forces and make things difficult for the government agency where they worked. They might even go on strike. This would hinder the work of the foreign specialists who had come to help Vietnam. It would also cause great harm to the economic and political interests of the government.

One day, while I was at work, Comrade Bui Khon, head of our company's planning department, came in a hurry to see me. "Comrade Quang," he said, "you are a translator and interpreter. If you see any of the company's managers do something wrong please report the matter to us. We shall definitely solve the problem. I hope that you do not listen to any colleagues who urge you to join in a strike. That would not be a good thing to do. I know that some interpreters and translators in government offices have decided to go on strike tomorrow. Will you be joining them?"

As I did not know what his intention was, I pretended not to understand. I feigned surprise and asked him: "What on earth are you talking about?"

"Not long ago," he explained, "at a meeting of the company's department for work with foreign specialists, some managers proposed new rules to save government money. The proposals were adopted and the new rules issued. These new rules, however, are not appropriate for interpreters. For example, when leading cadres receive foreign visitors or specialists only they are now allowed to smoke cigarettes with them. Interpreters are not given cigarettes. When tea is served, only the leading cadres and visitors or specialists can have sugar in their tea. Interpreters are not allowed sugar. When visiting specialists go on site for an inspection, interpreters can travel in the car with them on the way there but on the way back they have to walk. These are just some of the new rules. The interpreters feel that these new rules insult their dignity in the presence of foreigners, so they have called a strike and a protest in front of the parliament building." I then realized that the situation had become very serious.

Mr. Khon continued: "Comrade Quang, you are a party member and a leading cadre. If you have any problem please come straight to us and we shall definitely sort it out."

I said: "I do not have any problem. I did not understand why some interpreters would do such things. No one has asked me to join any action. If anyone does come and ask me to join the strike I shall refuse, so please do not worry."

When he heard that he was reassured.

Visit to Hainan

After working at the Import-Export Company for a while, I requested leave to go home to Hainan Island to visit Chinese Mother and my sister Neo. My request was granted and I made the visit in autumn 1957. After being separated for so many years, I finally saw Chinese Mother, sister Neo, and other Hainan relatives. Chinese Mother was both happy and sad. She was happy to hear detailed news about our family in Vietnam and to see how I had matured and progressed. She felt

that her efforts in bringing me up had proven worthwhile and she was very proud of me. At the same time, she was sad because she and her daughter were far away from Vietnam and from our family there and because they had suffered a lot since returning to the homeland. They had suffered a lot in their lives. She told me that for over ten years they had managed to survive only by diving in the sea to collect coral for sale.

When Chinese Mother told me this I felt deep grief and unease. I deeply regretted that by helping them return to the homeland I had caused them such suffering. But what had happened had happened and could not be undone. We could only place our trust in Heaven and Earth.

I stayed in Hainan for three weeks. Then I bade farewell to Chinese Mother and Sister Neo and returned to Vietnam. Yet another separation -- it was heart-rending! Mother's eyes were full of tears. I was so sorry for her. But I still had my mission: I could not remain in the homeland any longer. I could only comfort her and Sister Neo and promise to come see them again one day.

Search for housing

A while after my return to Vietnam, Mr. Tran Quoc Anh was sent to work in a different place and had to leave the small apartment that he was renting at 9B Truong Han Sieu Street. He wanted to transfer the tenancy to someone else. He came to ask Mr. Khon Dao and myself whether we would like him to transfer the tenancy to us. There were conditions. We would have to buy all the furniture -- bed, table, and chairs -- and other contents. We would also have to pay several months' back rent and unpaid water and electricity bills.

I could see how crowded it was for our two families -- ten people in all -- to share one small house. Day by day the children grew bigger and it became more uncomfortable. So I asked Mr. Khon Dao to move with his family to 9B Truong Han Sieu Street so that we would have the whole house to ourselves. But Mr. Khon Dao was notorious for his greed, cunning, meanness, and selfishness. He always found a way to take more than his fair share. He realized that if he accepted Mr. Tran Quoc Anh's offer he would have to pay quite a lot of money, so he refused to move out. In this situation I had no choice but to accept the offer myself. So Mr. Khon Dao took over our house for free. Later, when his organization provided another house for his family, he transferred our house to someone else and received a big commission.

During the Anti-French Resistance War Mr. Tran Quoc Anh was an underground cadre. He and his wife had many children. His wife had no job. Their life was very difficult. We had helped him in every way we could so that he would feel secure and be able to concentrate on his work. If he had had a heart he would

not have asked us to pay a lot of money in order to move into his apartment. But we did not want to blame him for anything. He needed the money and we needed a place to live. Both parties benefitted.

This lesson taught us the meaning of the saying: "It is easy to draw the tiger's outside but hard to draw its skeleton. You can see the face but not the heart." Do not expect your love to be reciprocated.

And so we moved to the first floor apartment at 9B Truong Han Sieu Street. The apartment was very small and narrow as well as very dirty and unhygienic. Living there was very awkward. In the second-floor apartment there lived a poor student named Mr. Hien. We often helped him out. One day he came to us and said: "I am going away to school soon. I know that you are living in very crowded conditions here. You have both treated me very well. Now I would like to leave my apartment to you. I do not ask for a lot of money -- only two dong. I shall leave a paraffin lamp for you to remember me by."

We were very happy to hear this. We gave Mr. Hien some money and moved into his apartment on the second floor. At that time a young man from Nghe An Province (he spoke with an accent) named Mr. Hoe was living on the third floor. Mr. Hoe and his family shared the third-floor apartment with a musician named Mr. Tan Huyen and his family. When Mr. Hoe heard that we had moved to the second floor, he came to ask us to give him our old apartment instead of returning it to the landlord. We agreed and he went to the Housing Office to register his tenancy. We were surprised to discover that he had tricked us. He had registered his family as occupying not the first floor but the second. We were very angry and argued with him. He went to get help from some local residents. These people were all from families that had served the French colonial regime. They had no sympathy for us southern cadres regrouped to the North. They bullied and overpowered us with their numbers. It occurred to me that we were in Hanoi only temporarily, until peace came and we could return to the South. I did not want to fight them. And so we moved back to our old first-floor apartment.

Next I went to see the landlord. His name was Mr. Duc Loi. I explained to him what had happened and asked him to let us move into a large apartment that he was using to store his belongings. Mr. Duc Loi was a very good person and sympathized with us. He agreed to my proposal and I immediately hired some people to move all his belongings to our apartment and all our belongings to his large apartment. This was the best apartment in the whole of the building at 9B Truong Han Sieu Street. It was spacious and clean, with a front garden and its own kitchen. It was a beautiful and very comfortable place for a cadre's family at that time. We lived there until we left North Vietnam almost twenty years later.

I recalled the saying: "Good deeds bring good luck, evil deeds -- bad luck." It was true. Mr. Hoe used trickery to take our second-floor apartment for Mr. Tan

Huyen's family. Soon after that Mr. Tan Huyen's wife suddenly died. A while later Mr. Hoe's wife also died. Their children lost their mothers. There was no one to look after them. All day long they wandered the streets. A real pity! We had a large apartment to live in because we were good and Heaven loved us. We lived a good life and made a good living. Everything was as we wished it to be.

I had a Vietnamese friend named Mr. Nguyen Khac Hieu. He too used to live in Dap Da before regrouping to the North. He was now old^[4] and weak and suffered from stomach ulcers. He lived and ate at his unit, but the living conditions there were poor. He asked us to let him come and live with us temporarily and to help him cook his meals. As he and I were comrades from the same place and as Kim Anh and I were sorry for him, we were willing to help and make him feel secure. He lived with us for a long time. As our children grew older this arrangement became very inconvenient for us, so we suggested that he move back to his unit. But he refused. He was determined to stay and we could not do anything about it.

Some time later Kim Anh gave birth to our son Hung. He cried and screamed a lot and this bothered Mr. Nguyen Khac Hieu, so -- luckily for us -- he finally returned to his unit.

This taught us another good lesson and broadened our range of vision. It is very difficult to judge people's characters. We pitied others, but they did not pity us in return. When we did anyone a favor, we risked arousing the resentment of others. All the same, Mr. Nguyen Khac Hieu was reasonable. After the South was liberated and the country reunited, he went back to Dap Da and told his wife about our good deeds and kind hearts. So when our daughter Ai Nga got married they made a beautiful wedding cake for her to show their gratitude to us. That was a good thing to do.

Whether people were good or bad to us, we still loved and sympathized with them and were ready to help them when they needed us. After Mr. Nguyen Khac Hieu, many friends and relatives came from far and wide to stay with us. We always welcomed them with open arms and did all we could to help them. To our great regret, most of them proved to have fickle hearts. They were the sort of people who do not know how to behave and do not understand the difference between feeling and duty. When they returned to the South they immediately betrayed us and treated us as strangers. When we happened to bump into them on the street they pretended not to know us. It was as though a strong wind had blown away all their memories of the past.

Notes

[1] Just as a hectare was also called a “Western mau,” so was a native mau (mau ta), equal to 3,600 square meters, also called a “native hectare.”

[2] A large coastal province south of Hanoi. In 1991 it was divided into Nghe An Province and Ha Tinh Province.

[3] The Communist Party of Vietnam was founded in 1925. The Society of Young Comrades was a patriotic youth group and a precursor of the Communist Party.

[4] He was in his fifties, but in Vietnam that is already considered old.

Chapter 25. Further work in the field of foreign trade

I worked at the General Import-Export Company for over a year. In 1957 the company expanded and the Ministry of Foreign Trade decided to establish several more import-export companies for different kinds of products, such as food and livestock, minerals, forest products, machinery, and general merchandise. I was assigned to work at the Miscellaneous Goods Import-Export Company.

The director of the company was Mr. Nguyen Duan. He was the one who in 1950 had asked me to go to Hong Kong with him. He had just returned from China. He was honest, gentle, amiable, and proud. It was easy to get along with him. He had been a revolutionary fighter in Ba To during the peasant uprising there in 1930.^[1] He was highly disciplined and organized but very old-fashioned.

I was assigned to work in the Planning Department. I was responsible for monitoring trade with China and for checking translations. The director of the department was Mr. Bui Khon.

Foreign trade was a completely new field for me. I knew nothing about it. I was as blind as a bat. Fortunately, when Mr. Duan returned from China he brought back with him a lot of Chinese-language textbooks about the import-export business. He entrusted them to my care. From those textbooks I gained much knowledge that helped me greatly in my career.

The Miscellaneous Goods Import-Export Company was newly established. I realized that most of my colleagues were former professional soldiers who knew nothing about foreign trade. Sometimes I stayed late at the office in order to select especially important documents from the Chinese textbooks and translate them into Vietnamese for the use of my colleagues. These documents were a great help to them.

At the Miscellaneous Goods Import-Export Company I had a Vietnamese friend named Mr. Nguyen Cat. He too was a former professional soldier. He worked in the General Merchandise Office, where he was in charge of bicycles. He

monitored the movement of certain goods, mainly bicycles. I often translated short stories from Chinese books and newspapers. As Mr. Cat was good friends with the editor of the newspaper *Thoi Moi (New Times)*, I asked him to take my translated stories to his friend. All these short stories were published and we received royalties for them, which we used to buy breakfast. Mr. Cat and I also became good friends.

On one occasion Mr. Cat asked me to accompany him to the General Merchandise Import-Export Company to receive bicycles for the Miscellaneous Goods Import-Export Company. During our visit he introduced me to someone he knew there and this enabled me to buy a very beautiful bicycle of the *Favorit* model.^[2] At that time bicycles were allocated only as special rewards and with prior approval, so I was very happy.

Kim Anh also took a job at the Miscellaneous Goods Import-Export Company -- in the Arts and Crafts Department, on a contractual basis. As the children were still young, after a while she asked to leave the job. She continued doing some work at home and was provided with materials for that purpose. Only in 1964 did she return to work on a permanent basis. Later she was transferred to a firm manufacturing woolen goods under the Bureau of Light Industry.

When I had just started at the Miscellaneous Goods Import-Export Company the Mai Lam Dike on the outskirts of Hanoi broke. Like many others, I was put to work for ten days to repair the dike. On returning home I had hardly had time to rest when the company mobilized me again. But I was too tired and did not go again.

After a while the leadership wanted to send me to Bach Long Vi Island to take charge of a team of interpreters there.^[3] The Miscellaneous Goods Import-Export Company did not want me to go, but could not openly oppose a decision of the leadership. The company sent a cadre from its personnel office named Mr. Nguyen Kha Ke to talk with me. He said: "If you go to Bach Long Vi Island you will be permanently stationed there and belong to the Haiphong municipal administration. You will not be able to return to Hanoi."

"In that case I won't go," I said.

"Good," replied Mr. Ke, "but you have to give a reason why you cannot go."

At that time Kim Anh was expecting our son Hung. That was a good reason for me to give. I told Mr. Ke that my wife was having a baby very soon and we had no one else to take care of the young children.

Mr. Ke was very happy to hear that. He asked me to recommend someone to go in my place. Straight away I recommended Mr. Ngo Tam Dan, who was then working at the Finance Ministry. Mr. Ke left to report to the leadership. As a result, Mr. Ngo Tam Dan was sent to Bach Long Vi Island instead of me. He was overjoyed to accept this assignment, because he had two brothers working in

Haikou, the capital city of Hainan, which was not very far away from Bach Long Vi Island. He hoped that he would be able to go to Haikou to visit his brothers. It was a rare chance for him.

The import-export business continued to grow. In 1958 the Ministry of Foreign Trade decided to set up a commercial agency in Hong Kong in order to expand Vietnam's trade with the Hong Kong market. The ministry appointed Mr. Ngo Thanh Giang and Mr. Tran Hoan Thong to go to Hong Kong to establish contact with Chinese import-export companies and related agencies there and request their help in learning how to do business in the Hong Kong market. However, the Hong Kong offices of these organizations had not received corresponding instructions from their head offices and without such instructions they were unwilling to provide any assistance. Mr. Ngo Thanh Giang and Mr. Tran Hoan Thong stayed in Hong Kong about one year without learning anything or doing any business. Mr. Ngo Thanh Giang had to return to Vietnam, leaving Mr. Tran Hoan Thong alone in Hong Kong.

Later the Ministry of Foreign Trade appointed Mr. Nguyen Duan and myself to head a ministry delegation to go to Guangzhou for negotiations with the Southern China Foreign Trade Bureau and the Guangdong Province Foreign Trade Bureau. The head of the Chinese delegation was Mr. Nghiem Tuan, director of the Guangdong Province Foreign Trade Bureau.

At the conference our delegation requested the Chinese side to share with us their experience of the Hong Kong market -- how they assessed the situation on that market, which export goods were in demand there, how they had developed their business network and relationships with banks, transport companies, and insurance companies, how they had set up their own business agency. We asked for guidance concerning the rules and regulations governing the conduct of business in Hong Kong. We also requested that Vietnam's import-export companies be allowed to join the Guangzhou Trade Association. Finally, we asked the Chinese side to help train Vietnamese students in China.

The Chinese side granted all our requests. They agreed to help our ministry establish a general import-export agency in Hong Kong called Vinacor Hong Kong (Vinacor HK for short). Vietnam's import-export companies would be allowed to join the Guangzhou Trade Association and display their goods at its twice-yearly (spring and autumn) trade exhibitions of Chinese export goods (China Expo). At that time Vietnam was the only socialist country accorded these privileges.

So our negotiations were very successful. We were really happy. During our stay in Guangzhou we were warmly received by Mr. Dao Chu, secretary of the Southern China Foreign Trade Bureau, by Mr. Tran Hao, chairman of the executive committee of Guangdong Province, and by many other province leaders. A reception was arranged for us. We were taken to visit some enterprises

producing export goods and many other places. Never before had I felt so proud. I was very happy and enthusiastic. After Mr. Nguyen Duan and I returned home from the negotiations, I was appointed to go to Guangzhou twice each year to oversee the display of our goods at the trade exhibitions of the Guangzhou Trade Association. I continued to make these trips until the middle of 1960.

Before each trade exhibition opened our Chinese colleagues made very thorough preparations. We were assigned rooms ready for our use. Workers and technicians were also sent to help decorate our exhibition rooms. We did not have to pay for anything. The Chinese side supplied materials and paid all expenses.

True to the spirit of proletarian internationalism, the Chinese workers and technicians worked hard at all hours of the day and night so that our rooms should be ready in time for the opening.

The leader of the team of Chinese technicians who helped us was called Comrade Ly. As we were later to learn, at that time his wife was very sick. She was at home alone with no one to look after her. Comrade Ly went on working and made no mention of it. When the task was completed, Comrade Nguyen Trong Tinh, the head of our group, invited him to share a friendly meal with us as an expression of our appreciation. Comrade Ly thanked him but declined. As we kept on inviting him, he eventually told us the truth about his domestic situation. Now that the work was done he just wanted to go home and take care of his wife. Comrade Nguyen Trong Tinh and I were very moved to hear this. We could not hold back our tears.

When the exhibition opened many buyers came to do business with us. At that time I was the only one with the ability to interpret for our group and this made things very difficult. The leaders of the Guangdong Province Foreign Trade Bureau saw the situation and immediately arranged for two additional interpreters -- one Chinese comrade from Beijing and another from Nanning^[4] -- to fly to Guangzhou to help us. With their assistance our business went smoothly. The Chinese side paid the interpreters' travel and living expenses.

In order to help Vietnam identify goods that could be exported for foreign currency, develop their production, and create jobs for its people, Vietnamese workers were sent for training in various places in Guangdong Province such as Guangzhou, Dongguan, Nanhai, Xinfeng, and Futian, where they were taught how to make and prepare arts and crafts products for export -- for example, rugs, straw mats, bamboo chairs, palm tree leaves, ivory goods (mainly from elephant tusks), silver goods, and painted and lacquered pictures.

The Vietnamese trainees always received sincere and impartial guidance from the Chinese import-export companies and related agencies, enabling them to learn production techniques as quickly as they could and be of the greatest possible value to their enterprises upon their return home. Vietnam's import-export

companies began to sell the new products to other countries as well as to different parts of Vietnam. All the techniques learned from China were put to good use.

With the wholehearted assistance of the Chinese side, the Miscellaneous Goods Import-Export Company and the Arts and Crafts Import-Export Company exported increasing quantities of goods, earned considerable amounts of foreign currency, and provided employment for several tens of thousands of workers. Responsible Vietnamese officials will always cherish fond memories of the fraternal aid given by China. Even after many storms and hurricanes, they still have good feelings about China.

On one of these trips to the exhibition of the Guangzhou Trade Association our delegation was led by Mr. Nguyen Trong Vuong, a deputy director of the General Import-Export Company and my boss there. He was a demobilized army officer. He was very mean, resentful, and narrow-minded, and had no sympathy for lower-ranking staff. If he saw that one of his subordinates was more capable than him, he would surreptitiously look for some way to bring that person down. One Sunday the Chinese side invited our delegation to go and watch an international football game. Mr. Vuong did not let us go but made us stay at work. I sincerely asked him to allow the staff to go. This, I said, was the first time they had been abroad and it would encourage them to work even better. I offered to stay and do all our work myself. However, he was determined not to allow them to go. He thought that I was beneath him and had no right to express my opinion. He secretly took offense and waited for the day when he would have the chance to take revenge against me.

After everyone else returned to Vietnam Mr. Duan and I, as the managers responsible for our display, remained behind in Guangzhou to dismantle the display and send the exhibits back to Vietnam. While we were away the company considered the matter of raising salaries of staff members. Someone argued at a meeting that my salary should be raised, but Mr. Vuong was strongly opposed. The argument continued but he remained adamant. It was finally agreed to await the return of Mr. Duan and ask him to solve the problem.^[5] When Mr. Duan returned Mr. Vuong took the problem to him.

Mr. Duan told him: “Mr. Quang is a good worker. He works hard and has great potential. He deserves to have his salary raised. This is a small problem. Why could you not solve it? Why did you have to wait for my return?” Mr. Vuong had to agree to raise my salary, but he was still angry.

I had already been in the North for over twenty years. I had worked in many departments and directly assisted many important leaders. I had discovered that the majority of leaders were very good people who took care of their subordinates. This Mr. Vuong was the only exception. He was narrow-minded and mean. (Later, when I returned to the South, I was to encounter another like him, named Mr. Dinh

Trac.) There were no good feelings between Mr. Vuong and his subordinates. Later he was the target of a great deal of well-deserved criticism from staff in the General Merchandise Company.

As I mentioned, the Ministry of Foreign Trade had decided to open a general import-export agency in Hong Kong (Vinacor HK). The head of the team sent to Hong Kong was Mr. Bui Khon; the other team members were Mr. Le Minh Cam, Mr. Ly Minh Xuan, and Mr. Tran Hoan Thong. After a little while the ministry recalled Mr. Tran Hoan Thong to Vietnam and appointed in his place Mr. Ngo Thieu Huy. Mr. Ngo Thieu Huy, whose nickname was Brother Phi, came from an ethnic minority group in Thai Nguyen Province in the Far North. He spoke poor Chinese and had no knowledge of foreign trade.

So the team had a lot of problems. Trying to improve the situation, Comrade Bui Khon repeatedly invited me to come and work at Vinacor HK. Our family was big by then. My wife did not yet have a steady job and the children were still small. So I declined.

In 1959 Kim Anh gave birth to Cuong. I was appointed to join a foreign trade survey group on a tour of China's Guangdong Province. We visited many places in the province, including Forshan, Xin Hui, Shantou, Huiyang, Haifeng, Jiangmen, Dongguan, Zhongshan, Taishan, Nanhai, Donghua, and Haikou (Hainan).

The head of the group was Mr. Nguyen Trong Tinh, director of Department II of the Ministry of Foreign Trade. Upon our arrival in Haikou, knowing that I had an old mother in a nearby village, he decided that I should visit her. In view of my official responsibilities I did not immediately agree to go. But he insisted that I should go at once. I had to comply. My visit was arranged by the Hainan Area Reception Department. There was insufficient time to give mother advance notice, so she did not expect me. When I turned up that day she was taking a nap and thought that she was dreaming. When she realized that it really was me she cried for joy. Then she asked the village cadre to telephone for sister Neo, who was collecting coral from the sea, to come home right away. Mother and children, brother and sister were reunited. Words cannot express how happy I was.

I stayed for five days. I made careful use of the time, visiting relatives and friends and touring the collective farm and some other places. Soon enough I had to bid farewell to mother and sister Neo and rejoin the survey group at Haikou. We finished the survey work in Hainan, returned to Guangzhou, and from there proceeded to other places.

At the time of my visit the homeland had just completed land reform and established collective farms of an advanced type. Large quantities of farm products were being produced. The life of the huge rural population was changing rapidly. Wherever I went I saw the signs of a happy, prosperous, and vibrant life.

After returning to Hanoi I wrote an article entitled “Homeland: New Changes” and submitted it to the *Tan Viet Hoa Hanoi* newspaper.^[6] When it was published I was overcome with joy. I immediately sent mother several copies of the issue containing my article, hoping to give her a little comfort and show my gratitude to her for raising and teaching me. Mother was also very happy when she received the newspapers. She immediately handed them out to local leaders, who regarded them as precious keepsakes and in turn passed them on to others. In 1989, when I again visited the homeland, the old leaders of Pho Tien Township, the current chairman of the township, and Mr. Lam, the township's current party secretary, came to visit me. They recalled my article and said that people in the community had always praised me for really caring about the homeland. That article had a big impact and greatly helped my career.

Whenever my work took me to Guangzhou I went to the bookstores and bought all the textbooks I could find on foreign trade. I brought them home to study and selected those that I thought worth translating into Vietnamese. I supplied most of those translated texts to foreign trade offices and to the Foreign Trade University. In this way I earned an additional private income. Altogether I translated ten books. The Foreign Trade University was overjoyed to receive these books because it had only recently been carved out of the Foreign Affairs University as a separate institution and did not have money for textbooks. Those books that it did have were used only for reference.

Gradually I acquired a reputation as a knowledgeable specialist among people in the field of foreign trade and especially among Chinese-Vietnamese translators and interpreters and staff of the import-export company. They had great respect for me and regarded me as their teacher. Whenever they had Vietnamese documents translated into Chinese they brought them to me to correct any errors. I was always glad to help. In this way I built a good relationship with everyone in the field and laid a solid foundation for my future. The leadership trusted me and made use of my skills. Whenever they had an important job they assigned me to work on it. It was a big honor for me.

In September 1960 there took place the Third National Congress of the Vietnam Workers' Party (previously the Vietnam Communist Party). Before the plenary session I was assigned to translate the congress documents into Chinese. Among the Overseas Chinese who worked with me on the translations were Mr. Trang Dung, Mr. Dinh Luc, Mr. Ton Nhan Hung, and Mr. Thai Tho Vien.

During our work we were honored with a visit from Chairman Ho Chi Minh and had a photograph taken with him to commemorate the occasion. Chairman Ho showed great concern for us, especially with regard to our meals. He asked us: “How are your food and drink?” We replied: “Dear Uncle, our food is the same as the food given to all personnel serving the party congress.” After that, Uncle Ho

talked to Mr. Nguyen Luong Bang, the chief organizer of the congress. He told him: “The translator-interpreters all work very hard. You must treat them in the same way as you treat the congress delegates.” As a result we were well fed at the congress.

When the congress was over I was assigned to translate into Chinese some Vietnamese texts on military affairs for the benefit of the Chinese military advisers who were helping us prepare for the fight to liberate the South and unite the country.

After I finished translating the military texts, the Ministry of Foreign Trade decided to send me to work at Vinacor HK. I still did not want to go. I presented evidence to show that I did not speak the Guangzhou dialect. The ministry leaders were not convinced. They told me: “Comrade, this is a party decision. You must accept it. If you do not we shall take disciplinary action against you.” Hearing that, I dared not refuse.

Before taking up my new assignment in Hong Kong, I sponsored a colleague named Mr. Thai Hoa for party membership. Mr. Thai Hoa had worked with me at the General Import-Export Company in Hanoi. He was a southerner and the son of a martyr. His father had been a revolutionary activist in Saigon. He was arrested by the reactionary government of Ngo Dinh Diem, taken to the Chi Hoa Prison, and poisoned to death there. His son was brought to Hanoi, where he studied Russian. After graduating he was assigned to work as a Russian translator at the General Import-Export Company. He and I shared a room. He was naive and humble and studied hard. Although he had already graduated he continued to learn. At that time there was no Vietnamese-Russian dictionary, so he used a Chinese-Russian dictionary. As he did not know Chinese he often asked me to help. We became best friends. After I was sent to Hong Kong he was appointed as a commercial attache in Russia. Upon his return he was placed in charge of the office. He was always grateful to me. Every lunar new year, both before his departure for Russia and after his return until the South was liberated, he made it his custom to bring his wife and children to pay their respects to our family.

Notes

[1] A rural district of Quang Ngai Province. The uprising was crushed by the French colonial regime.

[2] This model came from Czechoslovakia. Mass production began in Rokycany in 1948. The model was relaunched in 2011 in Kunovice by the Favorit Czechoslovakia Company.

[3] Bach Long Vi Island is in the Gulf of Tonkin, about halfway between Haiphong and Hainan Island. Its administrative status is that of an offshore district of Haiphong. Although its inhabitants are Vietnamese, the leadership wanted interpreters there to deal with any Chinese who might arrive on the island.

[4] Capital of the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, 561 kilometers west of Guangzhou.

[5] As leader of the delegation Mr. Vuong had higher rank than Mr. Duan within the delegation. Within the company, however, Mr. Duan had higher rank.

[6] A Chinese-language periodical for Overseas Chinese in Vietnam.

Chapter 26. At Vinacor Hong Kong and after my return

I left for Hong Kong on March 15, 1961, exactly two months after Kim Anh gave birth to our son Manh.

The head of Vinacor HK was Mr. Tran Xuan Phoi. Under him were Mr. Le Dinh Can and myself. My mission was to represent the General Import-Export Company, the General Import-Export Arts and Crafts Company, and the Haiphong Import-Export Company, and at the same time to perform administrative functions for Vinacor HK, including financial control, translation and interpreting, market research, and liaison with Chinese import-export companies and related agencies in Hong Kong.

The first task that I set myself was to put the property belonging to Vinacor HK into good order. For a couple of years stocks of goods and private possessions had accumulated in the office, using up almost all the working space. The goods came from several general import-export companies in Vietnam and had been originally intended for exhibition in Indonesia, but due to a political upheaval in Indonesia could not reach their destination and were diverted to Hong Kong. Now they were crammed into our office, for which we were paying a monthly rent of 3,000 Hong Kong dollars (HK \$), equivalent to 20 taels of gold.^[1] I started sending goods back to the general import-export company in Vietnam. Gradually our office acquired the appearance of a regular government agency.

I also presented proposals to regulate staff activities and spending. Previously the representative of each general company had reported only to his own company, bypassing the head of Vinacor HK, who therefore had no idea of what was going on. Even when Mr. Tran Xuan Phoi was head, Mr. Le Dinh Can continued acting in the same way. When the ministry leadership asked Mr. Phoi for details of our work, he was unable to answer.

As for spending, previously staff had always used agency funds to go to movies, plays, and concerts and for other leisure activities. When the agency car broke down they went to work by taxi. Each trip cost HK \$20. To receive guests they bought Brand 555 cigarettes in tins, each tin costing HK \$2. I proposed that we adopt a clear system of financial control and also a rule that before any report was sent back to one of the general companies it had to be shown to the head of the agency and his opinion had to be taken into account. For leisure activities staff should use their own money. When the agency car broke down staff should go to work by tram, which would cost HK \$0.20 per trip. There was no need to splash out on taxis. Brand 555 cigarettes should be bought in packets, which cost only HK \$1. Mr. Phoi accepted my proposals, as did Mr. Le Dinh Can.

I also succeeded in establishing excellent relations with Chinese import-export companies and related agencies in Hong Kong. Our Chinese friends willingly gave us their wholehearted help. So our business proceeded smoothly and grew very fast. We were always able to satisfy any requests from the general import-export companies in Vietnam. I also sold most of the goods previously stored in our office. The ministry leadership and the heads of the general import-export companies were very pleased with my work.

In 1963 I used my leave to visit my family in Hanoi. Mr. Phoi invited me to draw one month's salary in advance in order to buy gifts for my family. I thanked him for his kindness but did not draw the money. At the end of my term, when I was about to return home, he told me: "If in the future you want to buy anything that is not available in Vietnam, just let me know and I'll be glad to help." Again I thanked him for his kindness but never took up his offer. In that way I gained his trust and respect as well as the confidence of the ministry leadership.

On March 15, 1964 I had worked at Vinacor HK for exactly three years. Considering that I had completed my mission, I asked the ministry leadership to allow me to return to Vietnam. Mr. Phoi, with the backing of Mr. Le Binh, head of the General Import-Export Company for Food and Agricultural Products, and Mr. Vu Phong, head of the General Import-Export Company for Forestry Products, tried to make me stay on for another three-year term. However, with the war expanding every day, I felt that I could not leave my wife and children to suffer without my care. I was determined to go back.

Mr. Phoi finally had to agree to my departure. As he saw me prepare to leave, he became melancholy and was moved to tears. He told me: "It is good for your wife and children that you are returning home, but for our office it is truly a great loss. Without you we could not have enjoyed our present success. Only you could have established good relations with the Chinese import-export companies and related agencies. Only you could have won their trust and sincere help."

Hearing this, I too was moved to tears. I knew that he was speaking from the heart. He had a very high opinion of me. Later, when he returned to Vietnam, he spoke highly of me to the ministry leadership, just as he had promised. It was true that we owed a lot to our Chinese friends, who came to regard our office as a foreign affairs agency, always invited us to join them for entertainments, and introduced us to many prominent people -- government officials, big businessmen who had business dealings with China, directors of banks, insurance companies, and shipping companies, the chairmen and managers of the Chinese business associations in Hong Kong and Singapore, newspaper editors, and journalists.

While working at Vinacor HK, Mr. Phoi and I lived together. We sympathized with and learned from one another. He helped me improve my literary and diplomatic Vietnamese. Although I was his subordinate we became very good friends.

In Hong Kong I acquired real practical experience of state business. I learned to speak the Guangzhou dialect much better and greatly improved my written Chinese. In my free time I wrote several articles about the economic situation in South Vietnam. I submitted them to a Hong Kong business journal that willingly published them. As this journal was also read in Singapore my articles were republished in an Indonesian business periodical. This was a big encouragement to me.

While at Vinacor HK I helped a struggling Hong Kong businessman named Mr. To Ke Thao. Later he was promoted to director of the Shin Sang Import-Export Company, which had business dealings with the Vietnam general import-export companies, and became a millionaire.

Mr. Thao began his career as an assistant at a general merchandise store in Hong Kong. This store often imported Vietnamese medicinal herbs from Vietnam. It was a small family business. The business did not do well and soon went bankrupt. Mr. Thao found himself unemployed. He came to our agency and asked to do business with us. After we checked with the Chinese Import-Export Bank and discovered that he had only HK \$5,000 in his bank account the other staff members of our agency ignored him. He begged me to help him do business with us. As he and I were both Chinese, I agreed to help him establish contact with the Vietnam general import-export companies and buy from them some odds and ends of merchandise that the big companies did not want.

I told Mr. Thao that if he wanted to do business with us he had to be honest and repay any credit we gave him. He promised to do so. At first he bought only fresh bananas and Vietnamese medicinal herbs. Gradually he expanded his business and started to buy other kinds of merchandise. By that time North Vietnam was undergoing incessant American air raids and no longer wanted to risk shipping valuable merchandise. The country was exporting only goods of little

value that the big Hong Kong companies were not interested in buying. So the Vietnam general import-export companies sold them to Mr. Thao.

Later, after South Vietnam was liberated and the country reunited, there were border clashes between Vietnam and China and Vietnam adopted a policy of hostility to Chinese, including Overseas Chinese. Hong Kong businessmen who previously bought Vietnamese goods now boycotted Vietnam. Not knowing what else to do, the Vietnam general import-export companies once again sold all their merchandise, from gold to bran, to Mr. Thao's Shin Sang Company, which had never done business with China. In the course of ten years Mr. Thao made an enormous profit.

In my three years at Vinacor HK I always did my best. With the help of my comrades at the agency and Chinese friends in Hong Kong I achieved a great deal. Surely I deserved praise. Nevertheless, I had to work under extremely heavy pressure. Like all personnel working overseas, I was kept under strict surveillance by the secret service. Whenever I left the office, even if it was only to mail a letter home to my family, a secret agent would follow me. The slightest mistake could ruin one's whole future.

One Saturday evening a Vietnamese ship, the *Thong Nhat* (Unification), docked in Hong Kong. Mr. Phoi told me to go visit the sailors on board. I took the road along the seashore. As I was walking there suddenly appeared a beautiful young woman. She gestured to me with her hand and said: "Won't you come to my place? You can have anything you want." I was very frightened. Ignoring her, I looked straight ahead and quickened my pace. At last I reached the safety of the Port Administration office.

After visiting the sailors I returned to the agency. Mr. Phoi kidded me: "Why were you in such a hurry today, Mr. Han?"

"I was almost kidnapped," I replied.

"I know," he said.

I had not realized that Mr. Phoi himself was following me. I was very lucky. Had I stopped even for a moment when that woman accosted me I would have been in big trouble. For a minor offense you were criticized and warned; anything more serious entailed disciplinary action. I could have been recalled to Vietnam and cast down into hell. Never again could I have raised my head.

We were also kept under secret surveillance by the British authorities in Hong Kong. If the British embassy in Hanoi were displeased for any reason then the British authorities in Hong Kong would find some way to take revenge on us. For example, they sent people to photograph us publicly as we left our house for work in the morning. In an attempt to scare us, we were also closely followed when we went to visit stores after work.

Social conditions in Hong Kong were extremely turbulent. Every day there was a kidnapping, a murder, an armed robbery, or some other big crime. It caused us a lot of worry.

In Hong Kong there was a consulate of the South Vietnamese government. It had a large staff, but they were very frightened of us. They too secretly sent people to follow us. Once Mr. Le Dinh Can and I were in a general merchandise store, examining the goods on sale and taking note of prices, when we were approached by several South Vietnamese.

"You must take care," one of them warned us. "There are Vietnamese communists here."

"What, are you scared of Vietnamese communists?" asked Mr. Can.

"This is an instruction from the consulate," he replied. "We must all be vigilant."

On another occasion I was walking on the street alone when I met Mr. Han Tu Phong. He was a relative of mine who used to live in Go Boi. In order to evade the draft he had run off to Hong Kong and settled there. He seemed very frightened and also embarrassed to see me. He thought that I had come to Hong Kong to engage in some sort of political activity. Straight away he whispered to me:

"Brother Quang, you have to be careful."

I explained my position: "I now work for an agency that represents the Vietnam general import-export companies in Hong Kong. I'm here to do business for them."

He calmed down.

"Do you want to do any business?" I continued. "I may be able to help you."

He paid a visit to our office to obtain information about business opportunities, but unfortunately he decided not to do any business with us. So I forgot about him. Later, after the South was liberated, he returned to Saigon and told Mr. Four Dan Loi that he had a cousin engaged in big business in Hong Kong.

"Who might that be?" asked Mr. Dan Loi.

"Mr. Hung Quang," he replied.

Mr. Dan Loi laughed and said: "He is my cousin too, you know!"

He had suddenly remembered that we were all cousins.

When I was nearing the end of my term of service and making preparations to return to Vietnam, the Ministry of Foreign Trade appointed Mr. Truong Duc Hoa to replace me. As Mr. Hoa was an official of the Ministry of Foreign Trade and also an Overseas Chinese like myself, I was too trusting and sympathetic toward him. I was unaware of his connections with the secret police. I wanted to help him work as well as he could. When he arrived at the agency, Mr. Phoi wanted to arrange a quick test of his knowledge of Chinese (a very important

requirement) by giving him a contract in Vietnamese and asking him to translate it into Chinese. Mr. Phoi asked me to look over his translation.

I quietly expressed my misgivings. "As you have told me to do it I have to obey. But it would really be better not to set him this sort of test. I'm afraid it will cause misunderstanding and division among us."

"Never mind," replied Mr. Phoi. "If anything happens I shall assume responsibility. We must fulfill our whole responsibility to the ministry."

Indeed, as I expected, Mr. Hoa saw me looking over his translation. He seemed annoyed, but he said nothing and I took little notice. A few days later I offered my assistance to Mr. Hoa:

"I've been here three years. I've learned a lot about this city. I'll be glad to tell you whatever you need to know to continue the work."

At that Mr. Hoa exploded with anger. His face and ears turned red, his veins swelled up, his eyes opened wide.

"I am a ministry official," he yelled at me, "not a translator!"

I said no more. From then on Mr. Hoa did not talk to any of us. Every day after returning from work he took a chair outside into the courtyard, sat there alone, and talked to nobody. Mr. Phoi and Mr. Can were puzzled.

"Mr. Hoa is a party member like us," remarked Mr. Phoi. "He has only just arrived, but already he is showing a bad attitude. We have no idea what he's up to. It's very strange."

Before setting off for Vietnam I asked Mr. Hoa whether he would like me to take anything back with me for his family. He made no answer. I felt like laughing. He was a party member and had been chosen to work overseas, but he had a mean attitude and was behaving like a child. It was a real pity. I knew that his wife had a heart condition and wanted to help her, so I used my own money to buy a lot of vitamins for her.

There was another episode involving Mr. Hoa that made me half laugh and half cry. Just after he arrived in Hong Kong, Chinese friends of ours organized a party and invited us to come. In a quiet voice I gave Mr. Hoa some advice:

"The friends who have invited us often offer us a lot of wine. We must take care not to drink too much."

But he took no heed. It was his first time abroad and he was greedy for new sensations. He drank and drank and drank. Soon he was swaying from side to side. Then he vomited and fell down. Mr. Phoi and Mr. Can were upset and embarrassed. They did not know what to do. They could only apologize to our friends.

After returning to Vietnam I heard that Mr. Hoa and the other comrades at the agency were not getting along well. So the ministry recalled them all home.

My three years at Vinacor HK were also the three years of the great famine in China. My Chinese mother and sister in Hainan were in dire straits. To help them through those difficult times, I arranged for them to receive every month at my expense several tens of kilograms of rice, cooking oil, sugar, condensed milk, medicine, clothes, and other provisions. I also sent them money. The leadership of the Ministry of Foreign Trade had given me permission to go to Hainan to visit them before returning to Vietnam. Then, however, with the war in Vietnam expanding, they changed their mind and ordered me to return immediately and take up a new mission. Soon after that my Chinese mother fell sick and passed away. It was heartbreaking to be unable to see her one last time.

After Chinese mother's death sister Neo got married and went to live with her husband and build a new life.

While I was getting ready to return home, Mr. Duong Van Dam, chairman of the Vietnam Chamber of Commerce, paid a visit to our agency on his way back from a meeting in Japan. Mr. Phoi asked me to take our visitor on a tour of Hong Kong. I welcomed him with all my heart and took him everywhere in Hong Kong. He was very interested and happy. He really liked me. He was honest, good-natured, and approachable. He promised me: "After you return I shall definitely ask the leadership of your ministry to assign you to work with me at the Chamber of Commerce." I sincerely thanked him. Indeed, as soon as I arrived back in Vietnam he did as he had promised.

At that time an educational campaign was underway in the country to "preserve the party." I too took part. The party branch at the Ministry of Foreign Trade told me to write a report with clear details of everything I had done during my three years in Hong Kong -- for example, with whom I had worked, when, what I had said, and who knew his job.

Among those who took part in the campaign in our section were Comrades Ngo Khon Dao and Ngo Khon Phuc. They had to write detailed personal histories. They were both very worried because they had once applied to join the Chinese Kuomintang. If they reported this fact they would have a lot of problems. If they omitted it they might be accused of concealing the truth and creeping into the party on false pretenses. Then they would suffer even more hardship. They came to ask my advice. I advised them not to complicate things by reporting the matter. If anyone checked up on them I would willingly clarify the issue on their behalf. My reassurance gave them peace of mind. Nothing happened and they both remained safe and sound.

On my return to Vietnam I visited the General Import-Export Company to see my old comrades -- all the people I had known before leaving for Hong Kong. The company was then in the throes of the "Three Build, Three Oppose" campaign. My friends at the company told me that a new deputy director had

recently been appointed. Her name was Miss Ho Thi Minh. She was the adopted daughter of Chairman Ho Chi Minh. (Because she knew French, during the anti-French Resistance War she had been sent to Paris with a delegation of Vietnamese women to attend an international women's conference. Chairman Ho thought so highly of her that he adopted her.) So with Ho Chi Minh's sponsorship she was appointed a deputy director of the General Import-Export Company. She was vain, conceited, and pretentious and had evil intentions. From the start she aimed to bring down the management of the company and become its director. Taking advantage of the campaign, she incited some dishonest people who were dissatisfied with the current management to come forward and fabricate accusations against company director Mr. Nguyen Trong Vuong and also against some other members of the management. Mr. Vuong and the others were accused of stealing gold and silver, which were used as raw materials in the production of luxury goods. They were dragged out and kicked and beaten until they were black and blue. Mr. Vuong could not bear the ordeal. There was nothing he could do, so he decided to commit suicide. Fortunately, he was found in time and his life was saved.

Then Miss Ho Thi Minh went to Chairman Ho and gave him a false report. She told him that deputy director Mr. Nguyen Xuan Ba had conspired with Mr. Vuong to steal gold and silver bars belonging to the company. When he heard her report Chairman Ho got very angry and said: "Send people to arrest him and bring him here so that I can pluck out his beard. Let's see whether he continues to do such things after that."

When Mr. Nguyen Xuan Ba heard of this he was scared to death. He could not stop trembling. The poor man was unable to confide in anyone. He called to Heaven, but Heaven did not answer. He called to Earth, but Earth did not hear. He too tried to commit suicide, and he too received medical treatment in time to save his life. This "Three Build, Three Oppose" campaign was throwing the company into disorder. The more they fought, the more the fighting got out of control. There was no way to stop it. Mutual suspicion spread up to higher and higher leadership levels. Then the top leadership started to doubt the accusations and appointed a team of professional investigators headed by Mr. Nguyen Quoc Thai to go to the company and investigate the case. Their conclusion was that the accusations were false. Mr. Nguyen Trong Vuong and Mr. Nguyen Xuan Ba were not corrupt after all. They had not stolen public property. However, they did have a very bureaucratic and authoritarian style of leadership. They showed no sympathy for their subordinates and ignored their opinions. So some members of the staff had taken advantage of the campaign to exact revenge. They were encouraged to do so by Miss Ho Thi Minh, who aimed to gain control of the company. The verdict was

clear, but in order to save face the leadership took no action against Miss Ho Thi Minh but only transferred her to a different organization.

And that was the end of the story as I heard it from my friends.

“You were lucky to have left the company before all this happened,” they added. “If you had still been here you too would have been dragged into the affair and it would have become even more complicated.”

“Yes,” I thought to myself, “I am indeed lucky.”

After my return to Vietnam I received a letter from my younger cousin Boi in Hainan (Second Uncle’s son). He wrote: “My son is now grown up and it is time for him to marry. But he has no house so no girl will fall in love with him. Please give me the half of the house that you inherited from your father so that my son can find a wife.” I agreed to his request. The whole house now belonged to cousin Boi and his son was married.

In 1993 a big typhoon struck Hainan and caused severe damage to the house. Cousin Boi sent me a letter appealing to me for whatever help I could give. So we sent him money to repair the house. Soon we received another letter from him, saying that the house was completely restored and was now the most beautiful house in the village. We were very happy for cousin Boi.

Note

[1] A Hong Kong dollar at this time was equivalent to about 17 US cents. A tael is a weight used in China, equivalent to an ounce and three quarters or 50 grams.

Chapter 27. At the Chamber of Commerce. The Sino-Soviet split

After my return to Vietnam the minister of foreign trade assigned me to work at the Vietnam Chamber of Commerce. My main task was to research, edit, and compile documents about the market situation in Hong Kong, Singapore, and other southeast Asian countries such as Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Burma. I also had to write up the results of our work experience in the Hong Kong market and create files on individual businessmen whom I had met in Hong Kong.

All those documents provided important reference information for general import-export companies and related agencies in Vietnam. During the war few countries apart from Hong Kong and Singapore did business with Vietnam, so not many people read the documents. After the South was liberated and the country united, however, many countries jumped in to establish diplomatic relations and develop economic ties with Vietnam. All the documents then proved very useful – a real treasure.

My time at the Chamber of Commerce was also the time when the conflict between the Chinese and Russian communist parties was at its peak. Vietnam's communist party divided into two factions: the members of one faction were close friends with China while the members of the other were close friends with Russia. The two factions argued nonstop.

After a while the Central Committee of the Vietnamese communist party issued its Decision No. 7, which appeared to agree with the viewpoint of the Chinese communist party. The pro-Russian faction lost face. Many high-ranking officials lost their positions. Among them were: minister of foreign affairs Mr. Ung Van Khiem^[1]; Mr. Bui Cong Truong, who had only a short time before been appointed minister of economic affairs; and president of the Vietnam-Soviet Friendship Society Mr. Duong Bach Mai.

There was also a conflict inside the United Association of Overseas Chinese. When the chairman of the association, Mr. Ngo Lien, was assigned to work in the South, Mr. Trang Dung, the deputy chairman, and Mr. Lieu Thang, chairman of the association's Hanoi branch, both expected to be named the new chairman. To their surprise the leadership appointed Mr. Thien Thuy, chief editor of the *Tan Viet Hoa* (New Vietnam-China) newspaper. Neither Mr. Trang Dung nor Mr. Lieu Thang was happy with this turn of events. However, Mr. Trang Dung was wise enough to keep his disappointment to himself, while Mr. Lieu Thang was foolish enough to express his dissatisfaction openly. As a result, he lost even his modest position as chairman of the Hanoi branch.

At this time a delegation from the Czechoslovak National Assembly was visiting Vietnam. The Czechoslovak delegates and the Vietnamese leaders who received them agreed that the positions of the Twentieth Congress of the Soviet party were correct, even though this contradicted Decision No. 7 of the Central Committee of the Vietnamese party. When Mr. Thien Thuy learned of this, he remarked to Mr. Trang Dung: "The Old Man has lost his mind." An anonymous informer reported this conversation to the leadership. Mr. Thien Thuy was denounced for opposing Chairman Ho Chi Minh and removed from both his posts – as chairman of the United Association of Overseas Chinese and as chief editor of the *Tan Viet Hoa* newspaper. He was replaced as chief editor by Mr. Dinh Luc.

After that there was yet another scandal involving the *Tan Viet Hoa* newspaper. In response to articles in the Chinese press accusing the Russian communist party of revisionism, the *Tan Viet Hoa* newspaper published (I don't know with what intention) a statement that both the Chinese and the Russian parties were revisionist. This statement caused a lot of trouble. The Chinese ambassador in Hanoi complained to the minister of foreign affairs. The outcome was the dismissal of Mr. Dinh Luc.

Later Mr. Thien Thuy, Mr. Dinh Luc, Mr. Diep Bao Xuan, Mr. Duong Kien, Mr. Lieu Thang, and several other Overseas Chinese working at the *Tan Viet Hoa* newspaper, anxious about the tense political situation in Vietnam, left the country for China. They preferred to face a hard life in China rather than take the risks of staying in Vietnam.

After the departure of Mr. Thieu Thuy, the leadership appointed Mrs. Tran Lang, the wife of Mr. Ly Ban, to serve as deputy chairperson of the Overseas Chinese Campaign Group. Mr. Thai Nhu Chieu became chief editor of the *Tan Viet Hoa* newspaper.

Aiming to preserve unity both inside the Vietnamese communist party and between the Vietnamese party and the parties of all fraternal countries, the Central Committee of the Vietnamese party sent all party members an instruction to maintain neutrality in the Soviet-Chinese conflict and not favor either side. Anyone who violated neutrality would face disciplinary action. In practice, however, the many party members who said bad things about Russia were all disciplined but if anyone said something bad about China it was ignored – the leadership pretended to know nothing about it.

On one occasion Mrs. Tran Lang complained about this in the presence of colleagues at the Overseas Chinese Campaign Group. It was not fair, she said. Anyone who insulted Russia was disciplined, but if anyone insulted China the party did nothing about it. An anonymous informer reported what she had said. The leadership labeled her a pro-Chinese element, dismissed her, and abolished her post.

For some reason – I don't know why – Mr. Thai Nhu Chieu too was dismissed as chief editor of the *Tan Viet Hoa* newspaper. However, he continued to hang around at the newspaper office. The new chief editor invited him to draw his salary on payday every month, but Mr. Chieu said: "I no longer do any work, so I should not be paid."

Rather than stay at home doing nothing, Mr. Chieu made a deep study of acupuncture and started treating people at the newspaper office. Although he displayed no signboard, he became very popular and attracted many patients, including middle and high-ranking officials. But he was sowing the seeds of disaster for himself.

He treated people without charge, although he accepted gifts. Early every morning his patients were already waiting for him to arrive and cure them, crowded together like ants in a long line outside the front door of the building. The newspaper office was starting to look like a private acupuncture clinic. He also invaded other offices in the same building, such as the office of the United Association of Overseas Chinese (all organizations of the Overseas Chinese

community had their offices in this building). Half of the staff of these offices were crying, and the other half seemed about to cry.

Leading personnel from the various offices repeatedly advised Mr. Chieu to stop invading their space in this way and warned him that he was endangering public security. Mr. Chieu replied: "These people have come of their own free will. I did not invite them."

When police came and chased the patients away, they cursed the police and came back again as soon as the police had left. One patient, a veteran, told the police: "We put our lives on the line for you. We have returned from the front sick, but you don't cure us. Now we have found someone to cure us and you come to make trouble for him." The police could do no more. They accepted the situation because they understood that the patients were tough characters. No one dared offend them.

What a headache for the leading office personnel! Unable to persuade Mr. Chieu to remove his "clinic," they began to get angry. They urged him to submit an application to return to China. He replied: "I was born and raised in Vietnam and I shall die in Vietnam. I refuse to go anywhere else."

The great power conflict between Russia and China had a big impact on the situation inside the Vietnamese communist party. According to an internal communication that I received while in Hong Kong, Mr. Hoang Minh Chinh, director of the Institute of Marxist-Leninist Philosophy, had created an anti-party group because he disagreed with Decision No. 7. This institute provided advice to the Central Committee of the Vietnamese communist party. Policy documents, slogans – all came from there. For reasons that are unclear to me, he stole secret party and military documents containing information about troop deployments, hidden emplacements for anti-aircraft artillery, other weapons and military equipment, ammunition, the situation in China, and the supply of Chinese aid to Vietnam. His aim was to take all these documents to the Soviet embassy in Hanoi, obtain sanctuary there, and escape to Russia, but he was arrested by secret agents on his way to the embassy. I do not know what happened to Mr. Hoang Minh Chinh as I was overseas at the time.^[2] In accordance with party principle I did not ask any questions.

When I returned to Vietnam from Hong Kong the American bombing of North Vietnam was intense and continuous. The bombing was particularly fierce in the area around Hanoi. The situation was extremely tense. Living conditions were extremely hard, especially for workers and employees. Food and provisions were in very short supply. Workers and employees at government agencies and companies were therefore required to join in labor to supply them with food and

provisions. The union of company personnel also worked hard and liaised with import-export companies and related agencies in order to supply extra provisions to improve its members' daily meals.

The Ministry of Foreign Trade did the same. It was lucky enough to have a food processing enterprise in Hai Duong that often supplied all units of the ministry with chicken heads, wings, and legs. There was not enough capacity to refrigerate these chicken pieces, so they were stuffed into gunny sacks and left outside in the sun and rain. Even though you could get poisoned by eating such spoiled food, under wartime conditions people were not fussy. The chicken was considered a luxury and those who got a portion were very happy. They often joked that they would rather die with a full stomach than live with an empty one. A portion was also set aside for me because my colleagues knew that I had been abroad much of the time and had not yet had a chance to enjoy these delicacies. When they offered it to me, I expressed my appreciation and tactfully declined.

At this time Kim Anh had just started work making boxes at a packing unit of a general import-export company. The union organization told her to take her bicycle and go to a distant storeroom to collect chicken parts and bring them back to the unit. She had only recently learned to ride a bicycle and was not yet very good at it. She could not ride a heavily loaded bicycle. But as she had only just started there she reluctantly agreed. She put a huge bag of chicken parts on the back seat and half-pushed and half-dragged the bicycle all the way back to her unit. She arrived exhausted and drenched in sweat. The parts were divided among everyone in the unit except herself. They told her: "You are new here and not yet a member of the union, so you do not have the right to a portion." She had slaved for them and they were too mean to reward her. Not that it really mattered, because we would never have eaten such rotten stuff anyway. We were afraid of food poisoning. Strangely enough, though, I never heard of anyone coming to harm as a result of eating those spoiled chicken parts.

After a while I was reassigned to the Chamber of Commerce. A few months later Mr. Tran Xuan Phoi also returned from Hong Kong to assume the post of chairman of the Chamber of Commerce. We were again happily working together. During my time there I again often worked abroad.

Once Mr. Phoi and I went with some employees from the Ministry of Foreign Trade to a collective farm belonging to the ministry in Vinh Phu Province to grow vegetables for ten days. The collective farm had a cow that had given birth to a calf two or three days before our arrival. The calf had died and the collective farmers had thrown it into a canal, but when they saw us coming they fished it out and cooked it in order to "fatten us up." Mr. Phoi and I were scared out of our wits. We could not tear our eyes away, but we dared not eat the meat. However, all the others enjoyed it.

Once the union organization bought some food to be divided among the employees. I too was allocated a portion. In our unit there was an employee named Mr. Tan – a party member and a veteran. Originally from Thua Thien Province, he spoke with a heavy accent. He was a mean and greedy cheat. Everyone hated him. On the pretext that the next day he had to worship his ancestors and make an offering to them, he asked the head of the union organization to give him my portion. That made the head of the union organization and the other employees very angry. They mocked him:

“Mr. Quang is a Marxist. We do not see him worshipping anyone. You too are a Marxist. Why do you worship so much?”

At that Mr. Tan was very embarrassed. He closed his mouth and made no reply. Everyone else held their tummies and laughed. Although he had been humiliated, he felt no shame and continued asking for an extra portion. It was funny and also pitiful.

Mr. Tan was malicious and dangerous. Whenever he heard that anyone in the organization was due for promotion or for a raise in salary or had been voted a “Progressive Worker” or assigned to work abroad, he would find some way to block it. Then he would be pleased with himself and contented.

Notes

[1] Ung Van Khiem was minister of foreign affairs from February 1961 to April 1963, when he was replaced by Xuan Thuy. The author is therefore describing events that took place in the spring of 1963.

[2] In 1967 Hoang Minh Chinh circulated a critique of party policy. In accordance with Khrushchev’s strategy of peaceful coexistence, he opposed the use of military means to liberate the South and unite the country and advocated peaceful competition between the northern and southern systems. He also advocated democratization. He was jailed until 1972, then held under house arrest until 1978, jailed again in 1981, placed under house arrest again in 1987, freed in 1990, and jailed for another year in 1995. He died in 2008 at the age of 85.

Chapter 28. In China and North Korea with a government delegation

The United States was escalating and expanding its invasion of Vietnam. Civil war raged in the South. The devastation of the North caused heavy material losses and great suffering and depressed people’s spirits.

With the aid and support of China, Russia, and other fraternal socialist countries, we were confident that we would soon win the war against America, liberate the South, and unite the country.

On June 1, 1965, the party central committee and the Vietnamese government sent a government economic delegation to visit China, Russia, North Korea, Mongolia, Cuba, and all the European socialist countries.

The head of the delegation was Mr. Le Thanh Nghi, a member of the Politburo and a deputy prime minister. The deputy head of the delegation was Mr. Ly Ban, a member of the central committee and a deputy minister of foreign trade. The chief secretary of the delegation was Mr. Nguyen Dinh.

The members of the delegation were Mr. Dinh Van Tram, head of Department I of the Ministry of Foreign Trade, Mr. Nguyen Manh Cam, an adviser from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, other high-ranking officials and economic specialists from various ministries, the ambassador of Vietnam to the country being visited, and myself.

I was selected to accompany the delegation to China and North Korea, mainly as a translator and interpreter. I would also perform general duties pertaining to management of the delegation.

When I received the notice of my appointment, I was both happy and nervous. I was happy to know that the party and the government trusted me and wanted to use me. I also felt very proud because this was the greatest honor ever bestowed on anyone in our family. I had long dreamt of going to Beijing, the great capital of China, and meeting the Chinese leaders. My dream would soon come true. So I was extremely happy. But at the same time I was nervous because never before had I worked for such an important delegation. I asked myself whether I had enough ability to assume such a heavy responsibility. I worried that I might prove unworthy of the trust of the party and the government. It was a daunting set of duties. So initially I refused to go. The leadership, however, decided that I must go. I was very proud to join the delegation.

On June 15, 1965, while I was abroad with the delegation, Kim Anh gave birth to our youngest son Chien.

The task of the delegation was to ask the countries visited to give Vietnam economic and military aid. Our delegation visited the same countries again in September and continued to visit them twice a year. I traveled with the delegation whenever it visited China or North Korea until the end of 1967.

All the Chinese party, government, and military leaders and the people who came to see us from Beijing and other places greeted us with great solemnity and warmth. It was always arranged for us to stay at the Diaoyutai State Guest House. Prime minister Chou Enlai received us upon our arrival and held a banquet to

welcome us. Other Chinese leaders who received us included Mr. Li Xiannian, Mr. Li Fuchun, Marshal He Long, Mr. Fang Yi, Mr. Luo Guibo, Marshal Chen Yi, General Yang Chengwu, Mr. Han Nenlong, and Mr. Li Ke. Group photographs were taken as souvenirs.

Whenever our delegation visited China, our Chinese hosts always willingly did their best to satisfy all our needs and requests. From China our delegation would proceed to North Korea. All the North Korean party, government, and military leaders and people greeted us with great solemnity and warmth. We were accommodated at a state guest house. Prime minister Kim Il Sung received us upon our arrival and held a banquet to welcome us. Other North Korean leaders also received us. Group photographs were taken as souvenirs.

In every country that we visited our delegation fulfilled its duties with outstanding success. This was a great honor for our delegation and for me too.

During the years when our delegation was visiting China, the country was experiencing great difficulties as a result of the Cultural Revolution. However, the whole country and the Chinese party, government, and armed forces were willing to tighten their belts and work hard in order to support the just war of the Vietnamese people against America until final victory. China gave Vietnam unconditional material and financial aid on a huge scale over a short period. Vietnamese party and government leaders often described this aid as “extremely massive, extremely unstinting, extremely comprehensive, extremely timely, and extremely effective.”

Mr. Le Duan, general secretary of the Vietnamese communist party, also had to acknowledge that this was completely true. In April 1965 he visited China to request that Chinese troops be sent to Vietnam. During the negotiations with Mr. Liu Shaoqi, president of the People’s Republic of China, Mr. Duan said: “We always think of the great Middle Kingdom as our staunchest friend. The enormous resources that we receive in aid from China are securely reserved for us.”

After China sent troops to help Vietnam, Mr. Duan bluntly denigrated Russia and praised China to the skies: “We always think that the country that gives us the most direct and timely aid, whose people live and die with us, is China and not Russia.”

On March 23, 1966, Mr. Duan again visited China. During negotiations with prime minister Chou Enlai, he asked China to increase its aid to Vietnam. He said: “First of all, on behalf of Chairman Ho Chi Minh and the central committee of the Vietnamese communist party, let me express our sincere thanks to Chairman Mao and the central committee of the Chinese communist party for all the aid they have given to Vietnam. We always think that without the vast material aid that China has concentrated along our border, without the contribution of China’s People’s

Liberation Army we would be unable to win the war against America and save our country. We simply could not do it.”

On April 13, 1966, Mr. Le Duan made yet another visit to Beijing to negotiate with prime minister Chou Enlai and party secretary Deng Xiaoping. Again he praised China’s aid to Vietnam: “We always think that China is our closest friend. China has given us the greatest and most effective aid. The Vietnamese party and people will never forget this.”

In just a few short years China provided unconditional aid to Vietnam worth about two billion US dollars, not including food and clothing. China provided military supplies for two million troops, ammunition and other war material, and all kinds of weapons – modern guns, fighter planes, missiles, anti-aircraft and other artillery. China also built factories in Vietnam to repair weapons and produce all sorts of secret items.

In addition, China sent large quantities of military material and civilian goods to the National Liberation Front in South Vietnam.

At the request of the Vietnamese party and government, China gave Vietnam up to 400 essential goods both for the front and for the rear, including:

30,000 trucks

over 20 million tons of oil, 3,000 km of oil pipe, and an oil pipeline from the Chinese border direct to South Vietnam

a railway several hundred kilometers long and trains

five million tons of food

300 million meters of various kinds of fabric

tens of thousands of tons of assorted provisions

several hundred million US dollars in cash

China designated the provinces of Hunan, Hubei, and Guangdong and the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region as support zones for Vietnam’s war against America. These zones were assigned to provide material and human resources to aid fraternal Vietnam. Numerous facilities were also built there for the storage of military and civilian goods earmarked for Vietnam. During the war Vietnam sent personnel to manage these stores, while the Chinese side provided guards.

At the request of the Vietnamese party and government, China sent Vietnam many military advisers and specialists, anti-air defense artillery crews, construction and railway workers, and troops to secure the rear. About 340,000 Chinese in all went to Vietnam, although the largest number present in Vietnam at any one time was 170,000. China supplied all their provisions except for water and fuel for cooking. About 4,000 of these Chinese were martyred while serving in Vietnam.

The Chinese who came to help Vietnam worked side by side with their Vietnamese brothers and sisters. They made a great contribution to the war against America. Chinese and Vietnamese were of one mind and shared suffering and hardship.

Chinese anti-air defense artillery crews were in action 2,153 times, shot down 1,707 manned and 1,608 unmanned aircraft, and captured 42 American pilots.

Over a three-year period, Chinese construction workers in Vietnam helped build and maintain seven new motor roads. They also helped repair roads damaged by bombing raids, including the northern section of Road No. 2, thereby ensuring the smooth movement of traffic. In all they helped build 1,206 kilometers of roadway and 305 bridges (total length 6,854 meters). They helped build two additional roads not covered by the aid agreement – Number 10, connecting Phong Vinh to La Vuong, and Number 1B from Thai Nguyen to Dong Dang.

Chinese construction workers in Vietnam built two modern airports, many airplane shelters, nine railway stations, 239 underground tunnels (total length over 25,000 meters), and 138 artillery emplacements. They laid 149 underground communication cables (total length 103 km).

Chinese railway workers built or widened two railway lines (total length 479 km) and repaired 98 kilometers of other railway lines.

The Chinese navy cleared mines from Vietnamese waters encompassing a coastal strip 13.9 kilometers (27.8 li) long and a sea area of 50 square kilometers (201 square li).

The Vietnamese party and government were reluctant to request any further Chinese aid, being wary of the ramifications of doing so. The Chinese, however, offered additional aid through our delegation on their own initiative. For example, when several provinces of North Vietnam were hit by a typhoon and suffered heavy flood damage, China offered the Vietnamese government a loan of several tens of millions of US dollars to buy food, fertilizer, and other provisions for the inhabitants of the flooded areas. (At that time the price of a tael of gold on the Hong Kong market was \$20.)

In 1967, during negotiations in Beijing with the head of the Vietnamese delegation Mr. Le Thanh Nghi, the head of the Chinese economic delegation Mr. Li Xiannian conveyed a suggestion made by Chairman Mao Zedong:

“Some years ago, the Vietnamese government borrowed from us a large sum in US dollars. It has not yet been repaid. We know that you are still fighting the war against America. We know that you are still in a difficult situation. Even if the war soon comes to an end, you will still be in a difficult situation. The Chinese party and government feel great sympathy for you. So while we of the older generation are still alive, let China give you additional aid in foreign currency to enable you to settle the account now rather than passing the burden on to your children and grandchildren.”

Comrade Le Thanh Nghi replied by sincerely thanking Mr. Li Xiannian and asking him to convey our thanks to Chairman Mao, prime minister Chou Enlai, and other leaders of the Chinese party and government. He also promised to report the matter to Chairman Ho and the central committee of our party without delay.

After the negotiating session Comrade Le Thanh Nghi hastened to send his report to Hanoi. The response came quickly. Chairman Ho instructed Comrade Le Thanh Nghi to accept the offer of aid and convey his sincere thanks to Chairman Mao and the leaders of the Chinese party and government. China duly provided the additional aid and Vietnam used it to repay the loan.

So China gave Vietnam an enormous amount of unconditional aid. However, the Chinese side always requested Vietnam not to publicize the aid. Even today few people know about it.

The results of our delegation's visit to China were excellent. Acting in his official capacity, Chairman Ho Chi Minh sent our delegation a special telegram praising our brilliant achievements. The telegram made us all very happy and proud gave us endless encouragement.

Next we proceeded to visit North Korea. From Pyongyang we returned to Beijing and prepared to return home. Our delegation received a telephone call from Hanoi to inform us that Chairman Ho was sending his own private plane to Beijing to bring us home. That made us feel very honored and proud. When Chairman Ho's plane landed at Nanning, capital of the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, we received a second urgent telephone call – this time from the Ministry of the Air Force – to tell us that they were expecting another American air raid over North Vietnam and ask our delegation to proceed to Nanning and wait there until further notice.

When we reached Nanning, Comrade Dinh Van Tram asked me: “Mr. Quang, do you happen to be carrying any of the delegation's documents? If we

have the bad luck to be shot down, our lives are not important but our documents must not fall into enemy hands. We must guard them carefully.”

I assured him that I was carrying no documents. He was satisfied.

About an hour later, our plane received the go-ahead to take off and return to Vietnam. The pilot told delegation head Mr. Le Thanh Nghi that there were no enemy planes anywhere near our route and that the air force had sent thirty fighters to protect us, so he should not worry.

At the same time as our government economic delegation was in China, groups from relevant departments of the Vietnamese government were also in China to discuss matters of detail. One of the departments that had sent a group was the General Department of Army Ordnance. The head of this group was Mr. Dinh Duc Thien. He was a vulgar, arrogant, conceited, pretentious, and perverse man. Although he was a civilian, his manner was no different from that of an army officer. Whenever he opened his mouth he talked on and on without a pause. He had no sympathy for his comrades and colleagues. He knew nothing of etiquette. When he went abroad, he brought all sorts of people along with him – his secretary, his physician, his interpreter, his bodyguard, his assistant, and so on. He had more people at his beck and call than the head of our delegation. He brought with him over ten big suitcases filled mainly with all sorts of books – perhaps just to show off, because he never had time to read. His assistant, Mr. Nguyen Anh Thu, had to lug them around from Vietnam to China, from China to Russia, from Russia to the countries of Eastern Europe. The poor man was exhausted.

While Mr. Dinh Duc Thien was preparing for negotiations with the Chinese side, he somehow offended the Chinese officials. They hated him. They arranged for him to stay at the Beijing Hotel and left him there to eat and play, but they refused to work with him. They told him: “Our cadres do not speak Russian, so we cannot work with you. Please arrange for an interpreter so that we can work with you.” He looked for an interpreter, but could not find anyone willing to work with him. So for a long time nothing was discussed with him.

Our government economic delegation was staying at the Diaoyutai State Guest House. The head of our delegation suggested that Mr. Dinh Duc Thien and his group be moved into the state guest house as that would be more convenient for the negotiations. This was arranged.

When Comrade Le Thanh Nghi took most of the delegation to visit Cuba, he left Mr. Dinh Duc Thien and myself at the state guest house to continue detailed talks with the Chinese side.

At mealtimes Comrade Dinh Van Tram told Mr. Thien’s interpreter Mr. Nguyen to go and ask Mr. Thien to come and eat.

“Let him be!” replied Mr. Nguyen. “If he wants to eat, he will come.”

“Isn’t Mr. Thien your boss?” I inquired.

“No, he is not. I was working in another group. In the middle of our work he asked me to help him.”

While our delegation was in China the Cultural Revolution was at its height. In Beijing the Red Guards were fighting one another everywhere. Society was in a state of extreme disorder. The Chinese government often provided security guards to protect foreign delegations and foreign guests.

One day Mr. Dinh Duc Thien complained about the guards sent to protect us. When we went to eat at the Beijing Hotel, he told our Chinese hosts:

“After I joined the revolution I was arrested and jailed by the French colonialists and lost my freedom. Now we come here as your guests and you too send people to keep close watch on us and deprive us of our freedom.”

He repaid their kindness with rancor. It was most regrettable!

In the middle of the night, when we were all getting ready for bed, I was surprised to see Mr. Thien bringing me his three-piece suit. He told me to take it to the night manager of the state guest house and ask him to alter it for him to wear the next day on his trip to North Korea.

What an unreasonable person he was! It was the middle of the night, the hen had not yet stirred and the rooster had not yet crowed, and here he was bothering us about this petty private matter. What is more, I was not part of his group. So I did not beat about the bush.

“It is late,” I told him. “Everyone is asleep. No one is awake to alter your suit for you.”

He opened his mouth and started to curse:

“Damn it, here we are in Beijing, the great capital of China, and no one is available to alter a suit?”

“You have worn this suit many times,” I pointed out. “Tomorrow we are going to North Korea. Why don’t you wait until you return to have it altered?”

“You are young,” he replied. “You don’t understand the psychology of us old folk. When we grow old we are like children. We want to look good.”

The day before we left for North Korea, Mr. Thien’s assistant, Mr. Thu, had said to him:

“It is very tiring to carry all these heavy books around. You have not even read any of them. Tomorrow we are going to North Korea. Please let us leave the books here. We’ll sort them out when we return. OK?”

Mr. Thien had agreed to leave the books in Beijing. However, after he completed his work in North Korea he suddenly lost his temper and demanded that his assistant give him books to read.

Mr. Thu was puzzled. “But you agreed to leave the books in Beijing!”

“Damn you! Why don’t you bring me my books? How dare you refuse!”

Mr. Thu was angry and started to cry, but dared say no more. Instead he came to me and said:

“Mr. Quang, that old man is impossible. Dinh Duc Thien can’t be his real name. His real name is Dinh Duc Ac!”^[1]

“What’s going on?” I asked.

Mr. Thu told me the story from beginning to end. I was worried that their argument at the state guest house might cause our delegation to lose face. So I gave him some advice:

“That will be enough, thank you. Please just endure it. Wait until we return to Hanoi. Then we’ll sort things out.”

“Return to Hanoi for what?” he asked. “I am not his assistant!”

“What are you talking about?”

“I am not Mr. Thien’s assistant. He and I already knew one another. I was working at the Thong Nhat (Unification) Hanoi Hotel. One day Mr. Thien came to eat there and asked me: ‘Would you like to go abroad?’ I was overjoyed at the prospect and immediately agreed to go with him. He said that I would be his assistant. I thought that going abroad would bring me great honor, happiness, and success, but I did not realize that being his assistant would be worse than slavery. I have to lug around over ten suitcases. I am tired out. And now I have to bear his insults and swallow my anger.”

Our group finished its work in North Korea and returned to Beijing. Now we were waiting for the main delegation to return from Cuba.

During a meal Mr. Tram told Mr. Thien:

“The head of our delegation, Comrade Le Thanh Nghi, is on his way back from Cuba. His plane is arriving tomorrow morning. Will you come with us to the airport to greet him?”

“No,” replied Mr. Thien. “If he has crept off somewhere, then let him creep back by himself. There is no need for me to greet him.”

Mr. Thu, however, did go to the airport to greet Comrade Le Thanh Nghi. When he saw him he cried and said:

“Comrade Delegation Head, please let me return home or send me to work somewhere else. I can’t work with Mr. Dinh Duc Thien any more because he is no good.”

“Why, what has happened?”

“He has insulted me many times since we left Vietnam. He treats his comrades and subordinates just as landlords used to treat their servants. As soon as he opens his mouth he starts to curse. He insults you, he insults your father, he insults your mother. You have no dignity left at all. I can’t take it any more.”

Comrade Le Thanh Nghi immediately ordered Mr. Dinh Duc Thien to collect his briefcase and return to Vietnam the next day.

After the negotiations were successfully concluded, Comrade Le Thanh Nghi, accompanied only by a Chinese comrade named Ly, went to pay a last visit to the Chinese leaders. On the way back to the state guest house, a group of young people suddenly stepped out on to the roadway in front of the car. It was a dangerous situation. The driver – a former soldier – was going fast. He quickly swerved onto the sidewalk and brought the car to a halt. Comrade Ly, who was sitting in front next to the driver, hit his forehead on the roof of the car and broke his glasses. Comrade Le Thanh Nghi received a light injury to his right foot. Fortunately, no one was badly hurt.

At the time of the accident most members of our delegation were at the Vietnamese embassy. Only I had stayed behind at the state guest house. The manager of the guest house came to inform me that the head of our delegation had been in a car accident. Though thoroughly alarmed, I managed to ask for a few details. He told me that Comrade Nghi had only sprained his right foot. I immediately telephoned the embassy.

Although Comrade Le Thanh Nghi was not seriously injured, our Chinese hosts were very worried and arranged the best possible treatment for him. The hospital used the best plaster to make him a cast. It took about ten days for his foot to heal, although he continued to use a walking stick.

Shortly thereafter Comrade Nghi returned to Vietnam. The Chinese assigned a doctor to follow him to Vietnam and look after him there. Only a few days later, when his recovery was complete, did the doctor return to China. While the Chinese doctor was in Vietnam I stayed with him.

After the car accident, a rumor spread in Vietnam that Comrade Le Thanh Nghi had been assassinated by Chinese Red Guards. When I returned to Hanoi, my colleague Mr. Ly Minh Ky asked me about this story. I explained to him what had really happened.

On one occasion during our stay in China, when other members of the delegation were not present, I asked the comrade driver of the car assigned to me to take me to Tsinghua University to see my nephew Lam Dao Ngo, who was studying there. The university's Red Guards, thinking that I was a Chinese power holder, surrounded the car and shouted criticism at me. The driver helped me explain to them who I was and they dispersed, but somehow they had scratched the car. I was scared to death. "If the delegation bosses find out," I thought to myself, "I shall definitely be severely disciplined." Fortunately, no one found out. Thank you, Heaven and Earth!

On another occasion Comrade Le Thanh Nghi told me to prepare a reception for a special guest – a heroine from South Vietnam. The guest walked a few steps into the lounge, saw me, yelled “Mr. Quang!” and rushed up to me, hugged me, and kissed my cheek. Startled, I took another look at her. Suddenly I recognized her as my old comrade Hoang Anh Xong.

“Mr. Quang,” she told the delegation head, “is a good old comrade of mine from the days of the Anti-French Resistance War.”

In those days she was the cadre in charge of the women’s campaign in the An Nhon District on the outskirts of Qui Nhon, while I was the cadre in charge of the Overseas Chinese campaign in the same district. When I went to the North, it was arranged for her to stay in the South on a secret mission in Nha Trang, which is between Qui Nhon and Saigon. Tragically, her own brother informed on her to the Ngo Dinh Diem regime and she was arrested. She underwent many kinds of torture, but she remained loyal and gave her jailers no information. She was released from prison and continued with her mission. Later she was evacuated and sent to Hanoi, where she was awarded the “Heroine Fighter” medal. Then she was sent to Beijing for medical treatment. She and I had not seen one another for over ten years. It was a happy surprise to meet her again at the state guest house.

Over the course of three years I accompanied the economic delegation of the Vietnamese government on six visits to China and four to North Korea. I also accompanied the Vietnamese party and government delegation on one visit to China. The work was very intense and demanding, but I had to try my best. Together with Comrades Dinh Van Tram and Nguyen Dinh and other members of the delegation, I worked day and night. At last we completed our task and achieved excellent results. The head, deputy head, and other members of the delegation all gave a very high evaluation of my work and that made me feel very proud.

On one occasion the party leaders told Comrade Ly Ban: “Your group within the delegation is overburdened. The Central Committee has decided to appoint another comrade as a secretary to help you.”

Comrade Ly Ban sincerely thanked the Central Committee for its concern, but declined the offer: “It is true that our workload is very heavy, but the three of us (he meant Comrade Dinh Van Tram, me, and himself) can cope with it. We don’t need to impose additional personnel costs on the government.”

Whenever our delegation was preparing a foreign tour, prime minister Pham Van Dong and party general secretary Le Duan would receive us and assign our duties. General Vo Nguyen Giap, General Nguyen Chi Thanh, and other leaders would also meet with us. We felt highly honored.

While we were in China, the whole delegation was taken on a tour of major cities and famous sights, such as Beijing, Tianjin, Shanghai, Shenyang, Hangzhou,

Wuhan, Changsha, Hangyan, Nanning, Guangzhou, Suzhou, Xian, Liuzhou, and Yangshan. In North Korea we also visited many places, including Panmunjom.

Once the departure of our delegation for China was delayed because the scheduled time happened to coincide with heavy American air raids. For several days and nights bombs had been falling everywhere and the bombing was especially intense in the Vietnam--China border area. The leadership decided that Comrade Dinh Van Tram and I should go to China in advance of the main group, crossing the border by jeep to Bang Tuong Railway Station.

That day American planes had dropped many bombs, including time bombs, on the area through which we had to pass. Our driver, a former soldier, was very brave. He had no fear of danger or death, but drove along the road at top speed, not slowing down even when we had to cross a river at a ford. Comrade Dinh Van Tram and I, however, were afraid. Our faces were very pale. This time, I thought, my number must be up. Driving a jeep through an area laid with time bombs was extremely dangerous. A time bomb could explode at any moment. Either our bodies would be blown to smithereens or the engine would stop and water would flood the jeep and drown us. Though very worried, I kept my silence and placed my trust in Heaven and Earth. We got through the danger zone without hearing a single bomb explode. Perhaps the bombs were set on very long fuses. Anyway, we were lucky enough to reach our destination safe and sound.

After we arrived at the railway station, Comrade Tram smiled at me and asked: "Were you scared, Mr. Quang?"

I dared not answer directly, but just said: "What point would there have been in worrying? If anything had happened, we would have been in the same boat."

To myself I thought: "If I admit that I was scared, they'll laugh at me. I may be disciplined. If you join the revolution, you must not fear death. If I claim that I was not scared I'll be lying, and that too is not good."

During my visits to China, besides my general work for the delegation, I helped several comrades solve important personal problems. For example, one member of the delegation named Mr. Nguyen Van Dai was a manager at the Voice of Vietnam radio station. His wife, Mrs. Tran Lang, was a Vietnamese expert working for Beijing Radio. So he was very happy to learn that he would be joining a delegation on a visit to China. As soon as we arrived in Beijing, before we had started our work, Mr. Dai told me that his wife was in Beijing and that he wanted to see her as soon as possible. He did not inform the delegation leaders but only told me privately. I conveyed his request to Comrade Ly Ban, who immediately agreed to help. It was arranged that a driver would take Mr. Dai to his wife every evening after dinner and bring him back the next morning. He was very happy and sincerely thanked me for helping him.

Mr. Ly Ban's wife, Mrs. Tran Lang, came to Beijing to attend Chinese National Day celebrations on October 1, 1967 as head of a delegation of the United Association of Overseas Chinese in Vietnam. Their Chinese hosts had arranged for her to stay at the Beijing Hotel. She said to me: "I hear that the Diaoyutai State Guest House is very famous. I would like to take a short tour. Could you please ask Mr. Ly Ban to allow me to do that?"

I conveyed her request to Comrade Ly Ban. He agreed and asked me to arrange the tour for her and then take her back to the Beijing Hotel.

Next I reported to the comrade in charge of receiving guests at the state guest house. He arranged for her to move into the state guest house and live together with Comrade Ly Ban. He also arranged for cadres to take her on a tour of the surrounding area.

She was very satisfied and thanked me. When we returned to Vietnam, she and her husband invited me to their home as a guest to express their gratitude.

The Ministry of Foreign Trade had sent a team of three people to staff a transit post at Manzhouli (Inner Mongolia) on the Chinese—Russian border. Their task was to inspect and register goods being transported as aid from Russia to Vietnam through China. They had to live all year round in a sparsely populated area. In winter it was very cold and the ground was covered with snow. It was a very hard life for them. For a very long time the demands of their work had prevented them from returning home to visit their families. They were sad, homesick, and discouraged.

The comrades in the commercial affairs section of the Vietnamese embassy in Beijing alerted me to this situation and asked me to help. As I myself had worked abroad and been separated from my family for many years, I sympathized with their plight and was glad to help. I reported the matter to Comrade Ly Ban and suggested that he take measures to raise their morale.

Comrade Ly Ban agreed with me and devised a solution to the problem. He ordered the team leader to come to Beijing and report to him on the work situation. He would stay in Beijing for a week and the commercial affairs section would arrange a tour of the sights for him.

The second team member would also be summoned to Beijing to report on the work situation. He would come at a time when a flight to Vietnam was available. He would be entrusted with delegation documents to deliver to the Vietnamese leaders and take a week's leave with his family before returning to his post.

The third team member would also be summoned to Beijing. He would be added to a delegation visiting North Korea.

So all three members of the team at the Manzhouli transit post obtained a very reasonable solution to their problem. They saw that the leaders cared about them. Their morale was restored and they returned to duty with renewed enthusiasm. The leaders thanked me for my help.

Note

[1] *Thien* is Vietnamese for “good.” *Ac* means “cruel.”

Chapter 29. Beginning of the Vietnam-China split

Even though the Chinese party, government, and people gave Vietnam massive, timely, unstinting, unconditional, and effective aid, some individuals in the Vietnamese party and government leadership were very greedy. They were still dissatisfied with the amount of Chinese aid and criticized China for not providing more.

For example, at a meeting at the Unification Club in Hanoi with southern cadres who came to the North in 1954, Mr. Le Duan, general secretary of the Vietnamese communist party, openly said: “The aid that we receive from the fraternal countries is equivalent only to a single hair on a cow.”

Some people took advantage of the war to get hold of Chinese goods, materials, and funds on the largest possible scale and enrich themselves. As Mr. Le Duan said at the club: “The soldiers at the front are suffering heavy losses, but some people in the rear are growing rich.”

Those people whose greed was not satisfied fabricated and spread malicious rumors and propaganda to poison public opinion.

In 1965 Mr. Le Duan visited Russia, where he addressed staff of the Vietnamese embassy and representatives of Vietnamese students studying in Moscow. He bluntly declared:

“We need to reconsider our relationship with China. During the revolution the Chinese communist party put forward the slogan: ‘Use the countryside to surround the cities.’ They build socialism in accordance with the formula: ‘agriculture as the base, industry as the leading sector.’ The Chinese have a peasant ideology, not a communist ideology. We cannot and shall not learn from them.”

In March 1966, the Vietnamese *Historical Studies Review* published an article entitled: “The Trung Sisters: National Heroines Fighting Foreign Invasion.” In Hanoi and some other places in North Vietnam there were performances of the play “The Trung Sisters.” Both the article and the play were aimed against China.

On March 23, 1966, during negotiations in Beijing with prime minister Chou Enlai, Mr. Le Duan requested an increase in Chinese aid to Vietnam. The Chinese side agreed. After the negotiating session, however, Chou Enlai said:

“Comrade Le Duan, recent propaganda in Vietnam has focused on the Chinese invasion of Vietnam in feudal times. Why raise this topic now? Why study this episode from ancient history? If the officers and soldiers of our People’s Liberation Army and other Chinese participating in Vietnam’s war against America hear about this, what do you suppose they will think? Our common enemy at present is US imperialism. We are fighting together against US imperialism!”

Hearing this, Mr. Le Duan rubbed his hands together nervously.

“No,” he responded, “we are not using this historical topic as anti-Chinese propaganda. That was never our intention. Rest assured, prime minister, we shall definitely do our best to affirm and strengthen the friendship between Vietnam and China.”

At this point Mr. Hoang Tung, a member of the central committee of the Vietnamese party and chief editor of its mouthpiece *People’s Newspaper (Bao Nhan Dan)*, quickly added:

“That is correct. The *Historical Studies Review* did publish that article, but it was not directed against present-day China. Anyway, the newspaper of our central committee has never published anything like that. Our headlines always stress friendship between Vietnam and China. There is no ambiguity about this.”

In 1966 the Chinese ship *Hongxi*, carrying aid for Vietnam, was waiting to enter Haiphong harbor and dock. A Russian ship was following behind. The port authority immediately gave permission for the Russian ship to dock and told the Chinese ship to wait outside the harbor. While it was waiting there was an American air raid. Bombs fell on the *Hongxi*, causing severe damage.

However, the Vietnamese leaders did not take this incident seriously. When Mr. Le Duan visited Beijing, Chou Enlai raised the matter with him:

“Is it fair?” he asked. “Shouldn’t the first ship to reach the harbor be allowed to dock first? Why did you not intervene?”

Mr. Le Duan pretended not to know about the incident.

Vietnamese leaders did other bad things. Together with the Russians, they disseminated lies to malign China. For example, Russian and several Vietnamese leaders spread propaganda openly accusing the Chinese of stealing Russian aid intended for Vietnam on its way through China. The Vietnamese party and government pretended not to know about this propaganda. Their motto was: *See no evil, hear no evil*. Let the propagandists peddle their lies and nonsense.

The Chinese side was unhappy with this attitude. During negotiations between the Vietnamese and Chinese economic delegations, Chinese deputy prime

minister Li Xiannian complained to the head of the Vietnamese delegation, Comrade Le Thanh Nghi:

“The Russians and some Vietnamese are saying that China is stealing Russian aid on its way through China to Vietnam. Is this right? You know very well, comrades, that this is not true. You should tell the truth. It is the right thing to do.”

Soon after this the Vietnam Press Agency issued a statement on the matter. It acknowledged that some people were saying that China was stealing Russian aid on its way through China to Vietnam and declared that such stories were fabrications and completely untrue.

At this time the police in Hanoi and some other places in North Vietnam were causing a lot of trouble for staff at the Chinese embassy and for Chinese specialists who had come to help Vietnam. The police were rude to them, assaulted and beat them, confiscated their cameras and other belongings, and even illegally arrested and imprisoned them.

At the end of September 1967, I was appointed to accompany a Vietnamese party and government delegation to China as its translator and interpreter. The head of the delegation was Politburo member and deputy prime minister Mr. Le Thanh Nghi. The deputy heads of the delegation were Mr. Hoang Van Hoan, Politburo member and chairman of the National Assembly, and Mr. Ly Ban, member of the party central committee and special correspondent of the *People's Newspaper* resident in Beijing. The other members of the delegation were the members of the government economic delegation.

This time our Chinese hosts received our delegation with great solemnity and enthusiasm. Many party, government, and military leaders came to the airport to welcome us and over 20,000 people lined the route from the airport to the Diaoyutai State Guest House. We were also entertained by song and dance troupes.

During our stay in China our delegation was invited to join in the celebration of National Day – the 18th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China. After that we were received by Chairman Mao Zedong, deputy chairman Lin Biao, prime minister Chou Enlai, Marshal Nie Rongzhen, General Yang Chengwu, Mr. Wu De, Mr. Kang Sheng, and other important leaders. A commemorative photograph was taken of our delegation together with these Chinese leaders.

During the negotiations Chairman Mao met with the head and deputy heads of our delegation. He told them:

“China is giving Vietnam unstinting aid in a spirit of comradeship and brotherhood. Some Vietnamese think that we have ulterior motives for helping

Vietnam. They are wrong. We solemnly reaffirm that our aid to Vietnam is completely sincere. We have no ulterior motives.”

In response, Comrade Le Thanh Nghi and Comrade Hoang Van Hoan assured Chairman Mao that “the Vietnamese party, government, and people still considered Chinese aid to Vietnam to be most comprehensive, most unstinting, most timely, and most effective. The Vietnamese party, government, and people have always been grateful to China for its aid and have never said those wrong things.”

From then on, the party and government leaderships of China and Vietnam felt increasing dissatisfaction with one another. However, they did not yet show it openly. China continued as before to give Vietnam military and economic aid.

In July 1970, after the Chinese troops sent to help Vietnam had completed their mission, they were all withdrawn to China.

Throughout this whole period, Vietnam continued to disseminate anti-Chinese propaganda. Overseas Chinese working in state companies were distrusted. False rumors were spread in order to incite popular hostility toward China and Overseas Chinese. It was said that China had forced Vietnam to pay for food from China and repay its debt to China. As a result, even ordinary Vietnamese came to hate China and Overseas Chinese.

After Chairman Ho Chi Minh passed away, Mr. Ton Duc Thang became the country’s chairman. He showed no sympathy whatsoever for Overseas Chinese.

Even though the Vietnamese leaders had created these unnecessary complications in their relations with China, they still shamelessly went off to Beijing clasping their begging bowls. It was really ridiculous!

In 1968, a Vietnamese economic delegation again visited China to ask for aid. All the members of this delegation were new. There was no one in it who had been in previous delegations. However, the prime minister’s office still decided that I should accompany the delegation as its translator and interpreter. At that time American bombing was wreaking increasing destruction on Hanoi and I had been evacuated with my company to Lap Thach District of Vinh Phuc Province. For some reason unknown to myself, when the leadership informed the Ministry of Foreign Trade that I had been appointed to the delegation, the ministry did not inform me but reported to the leadership that I was sick and asked them to find someone to replace me. A few days later, while visiting Hanoi, I happened to run into Mr. Nguyen Dinh, secretary to deputy prime minister Le Thanh Nghi. (We were acquainted because we had both been in an earlier economic delegation.)

He was surprised to see me.

“Aren’t you sick?” he asked.

“No,” I replied.

“Then why aren’t you in Beijing with the delegation? The leadership asked you to go.”

“No one told me about it.”

“Ah, I see. Well, let’s just ignore them. You will soon see for yourself. Without us they can beg and beg, but they won’t get a single cent.”

I laughed and said: “You’re kidding! How do you know?”

“Just wait and see. You’ll see that I’m right.”

True enough, this time the economic delegation failed. They set off full of expectation but returned empty-handed. They begged and begged but didn’t get a single cent. Now they were consumed by anger against China and the Chinese. They sought to rid themselves of the Overseas Chinese, spreading malicious rumors about them and openly insulting them with obscenities that no one likes to hear.

From then on I no longer had the opportunity to accompany delegations to other countries. But for a few years I had been able to participate in party-government and government-economic delegations to China and North Korea. I had made a big contribution to the party, government, and people of Vietnam. I was very proud of myself. Now the situation had changed. Nevertheless, I felt satisfied. My wish had come true and I had no regrets.

Chapter 30. At the General Transit Company

The United States was escalating its bombing of North Vietnam. The bombs were falling over widening areas of Hanoi and Haiphong and everywhere else in North Vietnam. Day and night one wave of B52s followed another. Carpet bombing inflicted enormous losses of life and property.

Under these conditions the Ministry of Foreign Trade and the Chamber of Commerce were no longer able to conduct their activities. The leadership decided to merge the Chamber of Commerce with Department II of the Ministry of Foreign Trade. Some former personnel of the Chamber of Commerce were then assigned to general import-export companies in Hanoi, while others were assigned to import-export companies that had been evacuated to other places.

At the beginning of November 1970, Mr. Dinh Trac, director of the General Marine Products Import-Export Company in Haiphong, sent me a courier with a letter. In the letter he wrote:

“Deputy prime minister Le Thanh Nghi has a very high opinion of you. He has reminded the minister of foreign trade to promote you and appoint you head of one of the divisional offices of my company. Please try to arrange matters so that you can come and help us in our work as soon as possible.”

I was very happy to receive this letter. Since coming to the North, I had worked in the field of foreign trade for many years. Although I had made a big contribution, I had been abroad much of the time and had not spent much time working inside the country, so I had not had a chance to be promoted. Now I did have such a chance and was really happy about it, but there were many things to consider. I would have to go to Haiphong, which was a long way from home. I would be able to visit my family only at long intervals. Kim Anh would be at home with young children to face the bombing alone. Should I give priority to my work or to my family? I was caught in a dilemma. However, the leadership would decide and I would have to obey.

A few days later, Mr. Luu from the personnel department of the Ministry of Foreign Trade came to see me. He communicated the minister's decision to assign me to the General Marine Products Import-Export Company in Haiphong.

I told Mr. Luu that I already knew of the minister's decision to promote me and asked him to give me the corresponding document. It would be best for me to take it with me to Haiphong.

He replied: "Please go ahead and take up your new post. The General Marine Products Import-Export Company can then submit to us a proposal for your promotion and the minister will issue a decision. No one will question your right to the post. You are secure."

I insisted that I would not go until I had the document.

Mr. Luu returned to report my attitude to the minister. After that the minister himself met with me. He urged me to accept the position at the General Marine Products Import-Export Company.

"Please go to Haiphong," he said. "They need talented people there. You will have an opportunity to develop your abilities."

"I am sincerely grateful for your concern. I have to accept the organization's decision to send me to Haiphong, but it is very difficult for me. I wish that you could help me."

"I understand your circumstances, but at present I have no appropriate vacancy for you in Hanoi. If you hear about any organization that needs someone like you, please let me know and I shall arrange your transfer."

Later friends told me about a vacancy at the General Transit Company. I was extremely happy to hear about it. I thought to myself: "It would be best for me if I could remain in Hanoi. Promotion is not so important."

I reported to deputy minister Mr. Ly Ban that the General Transit Company had a vacancy. Right away he telephoned the director of that company, Mr. Duan, and requested him to arrange my appointment. Mr. Duan immediately agreed. So I was not going to Haiphong after all. I was just being transferred to the General

Transit Company in Hanoi. As I was satisfied with that, I did not raise the question of my promotion.

The next day Mr. Luu came and asked me: “Are you ready, Mr. Quang?”

“I am ready, but I am not going to Haiphong. I am going to the General Transit Company.”

Mr. Luu seemed unhappy about this, but he dared not object to a decision of the deputy minister.

When Mr. Dinh Trac heard that I was not coming to Haiphong to work with him, he got very angry. But he kept his anger to himself, waiting for the right time to take his revenge.

At the beginning of 1971, I started work at the monitoring office of the General Transit Company. The task of this office was to monitor the movement of Chinese aid in the form of materials and funds through Vietnam to Laos. The director of the company was Mr. Nguyen Duan, under whom I had previously worked at the Miscellaneous Goods Import-Export Company. The deputy director was Mr. Nguyen Luan, who had previously been secretary of the Ha Giang Province Party Committee. He was very honest, supportive, and sympathetic, but was not knowledgeable in the field of foreign trade.

The head of the monitoring office was Mr. Nguyen Van Chi. During the Anti-French Resistance War, he had been a Vietnamese specialist sent to help Laos. He was straightforward, highly disciplined, and a good organizer, but did not yet have a firm grasp of foreign trade.

The deputy head of the monitoring office was Mr. Le Van Hoa. He was very ambitious, dangerous, and cruel – an extreme element who caused internal splits and destroyed unity. He had previously worked in the commercial affairs section of the Vietnamese embassy in North Korea. He was sent back to Vietnam on account of his divisive behavior. Then he got a job at the General Transit Company because the director and he were natives of the same area. It was also thanks to his connection with Mr. Duan that he was promoted to his current position.

The monitoring office had a staff of twelve. Only five of us were party members: Mr. Nguyen Van Chi, Mr. Le Van Hoa, Mr. Le Thanh Duc (head of the party group), Mr. Nguyen Van Y, and myself. The others were all young university graduates.

I soon discovered that the internal politics of the General Transit Company and its monitoring office were very complicated. Everywhere I witnessed power struggles. People unjustly claimed credit, spread slander, made up malicious stories, and found many other ways to harm one another.

One of my colleagues was Mr. Nguyen Thong. I heard that previously he had managed the clothing department of the Miscellaneous Goods Import-Export Company, where he had been the right-hand man of Mr. Duan – at that time

director of the company. When Mr. Duan was transferred to the General Transit Company, he had brought Mr. Thong along with him. Mr. Thong was very ambitious, arrogant, conceited, and pretentious. He thought of himself as a rising star.

Knowing that Mr. Luan, the deputy director, was not a foreign trade specialist, Mr. Thong schemed to pull him down and grab his position. And in the course of time he did indeed get himself promoted to deputy director.

But Mr. Thong was not yet satisfied. He gathered a group of supporters around himself and plotted to replace Mr. Duan as director. Mr. Duan, however, was a tougher opponent than Mr. Luan. He had fought in the Ba To uprising in 1930 and had experience in foreign trade. Mr. Thong was unable to overthrow him. On the contrary, Mr. Duan chased him back to the clothing department of the Miscellaneous Goods Import-Export Company.

Mr. Le Van Hoa, who owed his position as deputy head of the monitoring office to the fact that he and Director Duan were from the same area, schemed to replace Mr. Le Van Chi as head of the monitoring office. He used all sorts of tricks and stratagems and won over some employees, especially among the young graduates. Mr. Chi was an old revolutionary, disciplined and a good organizer, but rather stiff, so some of the young graduates did not like him. They took Mr. Hoa's side against Mr. Chi and tried to harm him. They made the monitoring office – and, indeed, the whole company – disorderly, confused, and unstable, to such a degree that chickens flew, dogs ran, ghosts moaned, and God wept.

I had only just arrived and did not yet understand the situation at the company. I doubted that I would ever fit in. Being a party member, I stood up and put forward some constructive ideas, but Mr. Hoa did not even listen. Instead, he told lies about me to the organization. I found myself entangled in a web of intrigue. He was looking for a way to push me out of the monitoring office. He had no qualms about using mean and dirty methods. He went secretly to Director Duan to slander me. The director, however, understood me very well. He paid no heed to Mr. Hoa and even criticized him.

Mr. Hoa was not deterred. He tried a hundred tricks and a thousand schemes to get rid of me, but none of them worked. Later he went to leading officials of the Ministry of Foreign Trade to talk about me. Pretending to praise me, he called me a talented person and suggested that the ministry send me to lecture at the Foreign Trade University.

Toward the end of 1972, we received information concerning an imminent massive air raid by B52s against Hanoi and its environs. The ministry ordered our company immediately to evacuate our warehouse at Co Loa to a safe place,

because Co Loa was an important target for the American bombers. Director Duan, however, was very passive and refused to evacuate the warehouse.

Over a period of twelve days and nights, from December 18 to December 30, 1972, American B52s made 663 flights and other bombers more than 3,800 flights over Hanoi, Haiphong, and the surrounding areas. The bombing was continuous and very heavy. Over the Hanoi area alone B52s made 444 flights and other bombers more than 100 flights. They killed or injured thousands of people and destroyed residential areas, schools, hospitals, churches, railway stations, warehouses, and foreign embassies. Our company's warehouse at Co Loa was also leveled.

After the air raid, the manager of the Co Loa warehouse, Mr. Nguyen Kien, urgently sent a messenger to inform Director Duan of the loss. When he heard what had happened, he may have lost his mind. He did not ask for a detailed account of the situation. Instead, he hurriedly sent someone to buy 100 duck eggs and hard-boil them. Then he jumped into the company car and told the driver to take him to Co Loa. Assuming that most of the staff at the warehouse were dead, he wanted to make an offering to their spirits. According to Vietnamese custom, when a person dies an offering should be made of cooked rice germ and hard-boiled duck eggs. Otherwise the dead person's spirit will not be at peace.

And so Mr. Duan went to Co Loa to make an offering. When he arrived, Mr. Kien asked him why he had brought so many eggs.

"Why," replied Mr. Duan, "to make an offering to the dead. Most of our people here are dead, are they not?"

Now Mr. Kien was a former army officer. He was very arrogant and had a quick temper. Forgetting that Director Duan was senior to him, he exclaimed: "You idiot! We are all safe and sound. Only the warehouse has been destroyed."

Mr. Duan felt as though a weight had been lifted from his shoulders. All the warehouse workers held their tummies and laughed and laughed until they cried.

The next day Mr. Le Van Hoa sent me and Mr. Dam Binh Hang, also an Overseas Chinese, to Co Loa to assess the damage done to the warehouse. I knew that he was hoping that we would be caught in an air raid and lose our lives, but as a party member and his subordinate I could not refuse.

Mr. Dam Binh Hang did not want to go. As he was not a party member, he did not feel obliged to go.

"Mr. Quang," he told me, "I love you, but not as much as I love my wife and children. If I go with you and we run out of luck and something happens to me, my wife and children will suffer a lot. I hope you understand me."

It took much encouragement from me before he agreed to accompany me.

At the beginning of 1973, it was announced on the news that the United States had promised to halt all military operations against North Vietnam on March

15, 1973. Ministries and government departments brought all their evacuated units back to Hanoi. Our own Director Duan did just the opposite. He ordered us to evacuate – the further away from Hanoi the better. We were all on the verge of tears. Many people in the Ministry of Foreign Trade ridiculed and mocked him.

“Is that old Mr. Duan confused or is he crazy?” they asked. “When he was ordered to evacuate he did nothing. Now that the bombing has stopped and everyone else is returning to Hanoi he orders us to evacuate. What a hoot!”

The place to which we were to evacuate was in the mountains about twenty kilometers from Hanoi, near the town of Hoa Binh. On the day set for evacuation, Mr. Le Van Hoa assembled all those who he thought were not on his side and sent us away to the mountains. Besides myself, this group consisted of Mr. Nguyen Van Chi, Mr. Le Thanh Duc, and Mr. Nguyen Van Y.

We were well aware that this was a cruel plot on Mr. Hoa’s part. He wanted to send us away so that he could stay behind and be free to do whatever he liked. But this was an order from our leader and we had to obey.

Mr. Le Thanh Duc and I were assigned to stay in a house belonging to a family of a highland ethnic minority. The householder treated us very well. Around December 20^[1] the company director instructed Mr. Nguyen Van Chi to inform us that evacuated staff were not allowed to return to Hanoi to celebrate the New Year. None of us said a word, but on December 25 I told Mr. Le Thanh Duc to ignore their nonsense and asked him to return to Hanoi with me to celebrate the New Year. We stayed in Hanoi until January 4 and then returned to our place of evacuation. The householder brought us a big piece of pork as a New Year gift.

“On December 28,” he told us, “the villagers slaughtered a pig to celebrate the New Year. They saved a portion for you.”

We thanked him for his kindness and declined the gift, but he insisted that we accept it. We told him that we too had eaten meat at a New Year celebration and in turn offered him two cans of meat. He agreed and thanked us.

It was very cold in the mountains at that time of year. The house had no walls. We shivered like leaves all day long. Twice a day we climbed up the mountain and collected firewood to bring back for the householder. We did that every single day, even in the wind and rain.

One day I was chopping up a dried sugar cane when suddenly a fire-red snake jumped out. Luckily, nothing happened to me.

On another occasion I chopped off a very beautiful stick, brought it to the house, and shaped it into a pestle to take home. But the pestle did not look as beautiful as I had hoped. When the householder saw it, he went out and found another stick, brought it back, shaped it into a more beautiful pestle, and offered it to me as a souvenir.

A few days later, the company director ordered us all back to Hanoi.

We had spent only a month or so with the highland people of Hoa Binh Province, but that was long enough to appreciate their good-natured hearts, innocent minds, and simple manners. They were friendly and easy to understand. What a contrast with some of the bull-headed and horse-faced people in our company – cunning, crooked, dishonest, cruel, and dangerous in heart and mind.

Note

[1] Dates in this paragraph are by the lunar calendar.

Chapter 31. Advanced training in foreign trade

I had been at the General Transit Company only a short time, but I was already fed up with its complicated internal intrigues. It was an unpleasant place to work – a veritable hornets' nest. I wanted out.

I heard that the Ministry of Foreign Trade intended to send me to the Foreign Trade University, but there was no official decision. I did not know why. Not long after our return from evacuation, the ministry decided to organize a supplementary class in foreign trade for high-ranking ministry officials who already had foreign trade experience equivalent at least to a university degree. The students were enterprise directors and deputy directors and long-term professional staff slated for promotion. It was decided that I should join them. I was very happy. I studied until the end of March 1975.

The period of my training coincided with fierce fighting to liberate South Vietnam. Mr. Nguyen Trung Tin, chairman of the people's council of Binh Dinh Province, came to Hanoi to ask the leadership to assign some Overseas Chinese cadres to return and work in the province – cadres who had joined the revolution in Qui Nhon and were familiar with the situation there.

Mr. Tin held a meeting with old Qui Nhon cadres. Most of the Overseas Chinese among them gave some reason not to go. They knew that going to the South would be very hard and dangerous: they might never come back. When Mr. Tin pointed at Mr. Tran Quoc Anh, he said that he was originally from Saigon and could not return to Qui Nhon. When Mr. Tin pointed at Mr. Hoang Khac Thanh, he said that he had a hernia and could not go. When Mr. Tin pointed at Mr. Ton Nhon Hung, he said that he did not speak Vietnamese. If he went to the South, he would have to take an interpreter with him. So they all declined. At a loss, Mr. Tin had to ask them to introduce others to him. Right away they introduced me.

They were greatly relieved. Everywhere they went, they spread the news that I would soon be going to the South. At New Year 1975, the Year of the Cat, many

Overseas Chinese showed up at my home to wish me good luck in the year ahead. I thanked them for their good wishes.

It was also about this time that the director of the Foreign Trade University came to talk to me.

“Mr. Quang,” he said, “you have two sons at the university. The leadership requests you to let one of them serve in the army.”

Kim Anh and I loved our children very much. We did not have the heart to send any of them to their death, but this was a decision of the leadership and we had to obey. I discussed the matter with Trung and Hung. Trung was about to graduate. Hung had almost finished his second year and still had three years to go, so I asked him to enter the army. He was very glad to go. He was only seventeen years old.

Hung had served only a few months and was still preparing to go to the South when the liberation of the South was completed. At that time I was working in Danang. On their way south, Hung and his army buddies came to visit me twice before continuing their journey to their place of deployment at an arms warehouse in Long Binh, near Saigon.

At the beginning of March 1975, our course ended and we were assigned to do research for our dissertations. There were more than twenty students taking the course. Each of us was assigned to plan and set up a new import-export company in Lao Cai Province, including choice of merchandise, production, supply, and scheduling. I was assigned to focus on forestry products. Besides writing my own dissertation, I helped many cadres outside our class write dissertations for their degrees. Mr. Thai Chuoc, student leader for our class, was chosen to make a model report.

At the time when I was undergoing practical training, the majority of school students in the South were anti-communist. In late March, I had a telephone call from the Ministry of Foreign Trade asking me to return urgently to Hanoi to receive a new mission. When I arrived in Hanoi, the leaders of the ministry informed me that they had assigned me to work in the South. I had already been told that I would be going to the South, so I was mentally prepared. The assignment was not a surprise.

After arranging some family matters, I attended a course on “The New Situation, New Responsibilities.” I was ready to go, but I was still awaiting approval by the Zone V party committee. I finally set off on June 5, 1975. Before leaving I was summoned to a private meeting with Comrade Ly Ban. He reassured me and urged me to do a good job and not disappoint the party.

“If your wife,” he said, “or your son studying at the Foreign Trade University, or any of your other children have any problems, then they should go

to my secretary, Mr. Nguyen Duc Tien. He will help them. So you need not worry about them. Just go to the South and concentrate on your work.”

I was very grateful to Mr. Ly Ban for his solicitude.

I had been in the North for more than twenty years. The party and government had shown great concern for me, fostered my professional development, and enhanced my capacity for struggle. I had made very rapid progress and gained multifaceted experience. The leadership had trusted me and used me in many important functions. I had always completed all the tasks assigned to me and obtained good results. I had contributed a great deal to the party, government, country, and people and to the Ministry of Foreign Trade. The leadership valued me highly, which was a great honor for me and my family. I had fulfilled my parents' hopes for me and that made me feel very proud.

In the course of my work in the North, I had had the honor of meeting Chairman Ho Chi Minh and many other party, government, and military leaders. I had also made the acquaintance of many lower-level leaders. There were good feelings between those leaders and myself. Our friendship was close and deep. Although the situation had now changed, the heartfelt loyalty between them and me remained constant. Now that the South was about to be liberated and the country united, I had to return to the South, assume new responsibilities, and bid farewell to my friends and relatives in the North. Loath to part from them and overwhelmed by memories, I felt sad and forlorn. However, the Earth would continue to go around. Some day we would meet again.

Although I was very busy with my work and often had to travel far from my family, I was always very concerned with their lives and problems. I tried to do whatever I could for Kim Anh and reduce her load so that she would have enough time to look after the children.

Kim Anh was my main support in every way. She backed me up and helped me so that I could feel secure and do well at my job. We loved and respected one another. We never argued. When she returned from work, she would immediately do the housework and take care of the children. She loved our children very much. She never hit or insulted them. Our children loved and respected us in return.

Kim Anh also loved our neighbors and friends. She always sincerely welcomed guests. She never offended anyone. Everyone loved and respected her. The neighbors' children liked her very much. Whenever we were at home, we left our front door open. The neighbors' children would come in, lie and sit all over our floor, and ask for food as though they were in their own homes.

Our family life was harder in the North than it had been in the South. Our life was very difficult, especially during the war against America, but Kim Anh never uttered a word of complaint. We just faced the hardships together. We found

many ways to improve our situation. We took in extra work to do at home during our free time. I received books and documents to translate at home. Together with our older sons Trung and Hung, I would go to a warehouse or a construction site to do jobs like packing goods in sacks and big boxes, shoveling sand, carrying bamboo canes, making boxes, and knitting sweaters and cardigans. The additional income helped cover our expenses.

The American air raids grew heavier and heavier. The children had to be evacuated tens of kilometers away from home. Altogether they had to be evacuated four times. Three times they were evacuated to Chem on the outskirts of Hanoi. We asked the local people to take our children into their homes and feed them so that they could go to school there. As the place of evacuation was not very far away, the children returned home every Saturday afternoon, collected food and provisions for the coming week, and returned early on Monday morning. During their first two evacuations to Chem the children were safe and sound, but during the third evacuation there were air raids in the vicinity of Chem.

One Saturday afternoon, American planes dropped many heavy bombs and time bombs and fired missiles, killing and wounding many innocent civilians. For safety reasons the local authorities prohibited the movement of people. So that night our children did not return home as usual. We did not know why and were very worried. I immediately decided to go to their place of evacuation. Halfway there the police stopped me and did not allow me to proceed any further. I was more worried than ever but did not know what to do. I returned home but was unable to sleep. I wished for the morning to come quickly so that I could set off again. Then, in the pre-dawn twilight, the four children arrived home – Ai Hoa, Hung, Cuong, and Manh. They were all safe and sound. We were overjoyed.

We asked them what had happened. They told us that they had left Chem the previous afternoon, but halfway home the police had stopped them and arranged for a local family to give them shelter. Later the police had returned and told them that it was now safe for them to continue on their journey.

The fourth time the children were evacuated to Sau Gia in Ha Tay Province. Although further away from Hanoi,^[1] the area still suffered constant American air raids. The children were able to return home only once every three weeks.

At sunrise on Sundays, we would join the line at the store to buy food and provisions for the children, then Trung would carry them to the place of evacuation. On one occasion he had set off for Sau Gia and just reached the outskirts of Hanoi when he heard the sound of American planes. He took cover on the left side of the road, but perhaps the God of Heaven loved him, because on a sudden impulse he stood up and ran over to the right side. No sooner had he lain down again than he heard an explosion at his previous location. His sudden impulse had saved his life.

Nor was this the only stroke of good luck. As he approached Sau Gia, he saw that the surrounding villages had been obliterated by bombing. But Sau Gia itself remained intact and our children were safe and sound. Thanks to the blessing of Heaven and Earth!

At the end of December 1972, B52s and other American planes were carpet bombing Hanoi day and night. Bombs and missiles landed all around our building at distances as near as 40-50 meters. We were very frightened, but many of our neighbors believed that our apartment was blessed and took refuge there.

Kim Anh and I paid close attention to our children's education. We were not afraid of hardship, but took them wherever they could go to school.

When Ai Nga graduated from high school she was not accepted by any university, so I went to the Southern Office of the Students Selection Board to ask them to solve the problem. The person in charge, Mr. Nguyen The, also known as "Old Mr. The," told me that Mr. Diep Bao Xuong from the United Association of Overseas Chinese had informed him that any Overseas Chinese student who wanted to apply to go to university had first to obtain the approval of Mr. Xuong.

I replied: "I am a cadre working for a government department. I have nothing to do with the United Association of Overseas Chinese."

Mr. The then agreed to allow Ai Nga to attend a preparatory course. This, however, did not satisfy her because she could not be sure of admission to the university after the course. I asked whether she could attend a college. Mr. The agreed to arrange her admission to a college of finance. The college had been evacuated to a place in Hung Yen Province, about 50 kilometers from Hanoi. I did not mind the tiring journey and took her there.

Trung had applied to go to the Foreign Trade University, but the Southern Office of the Students Selection Board had sent him to the Trade University instead. I went to the office and asked them to switch him to the Foreign Trade University. Mr. Nguyen The refused to do so. Next I went to the Ministry of Higher Education to ask them to solve the problem. When I arrived, I was lucky enough to meet the minister's wife, who introduced me to the minister (I did not know him but he recognized me).

"What's the matter?" asked the minister.

After I had explained, he said:

"Your son wants to study in order to serve the country. Why should this Old Mr. The make such a fuss and create problems for you? Perhaps he got up on the wrong side of the bed this morning."

The minister asked me to sit down and wait a bit while he solved my problem. He went upstairs and soon came down with a letter of introduction. He handed it to me and said:

“This letter will help you, but you will also need a signature from Mr. Khuu. He is sick, but you can take the letter to him at home. Knock on the door, ask him to get up, and he will sign it.”

“If he is sick,” I said, “I do not want to trouble him.”

“Never mind. When he sees my signature, he will add his own. Don’t worry.”

I sincerely thanked him, said goodbye, and left. I took the letter of introduction to Mr. Khuu’s home. I knocked on the door and asked him to get up and sign the letter for me. I felt sorry for him. He was sick and lying in bed moaning. When he heard me, he got up with an effort and signed the letter. It was a real stroke of luck. I sincerely thanked Mr. Khuu, said goodbye, and went home. With the help of this letter, Trung was allowed to switch to the Foreign Trade University.

Ai Hoa took the examination for admission to the Foreign Languages University. Although awarded a high mark, she was not admitted. That was because – unbeknownst to us – the Vietnamese authorities had begun to conduct a secret anti-Chinese policy. Overseas Chinese students were not allowed to go to university. After the examination Ai Hoa stayed at home waiting until the academic year had started. She had still not received any admission notice.

We were very anxious and did not understand the situation. Again I had to go to the Southern Office of the Students Selection Board. That was a time of heavy air raids against Hanoi and the board had been evacuated to some place in Ha Tay Province. Ai Hoa and I set out to find them. The person in charge was still Old Mr. The. This time, for some reason unknown to me, he received us in a friendly manner and seemed very willing to solve our problem immediately.

“If I solve this problem,” he remarked, “the parents of the northern students will definitely raise questions, but I shall ignore them. Their children really get more education than our southern children.”

He gave Ai Hoa a letter of introduction to Agricultural University No. 2.^[2] We had no choice. All other universities had already started teaching and were no longer admitting new students. This was the only university that she could attend. I thought that any university was better than none at all.

In his letter of introduction, Mr. The wrote that Ai Hoa’s documents could not be enclosed due to circumstances connected with evacuation, but that they would be sent later. He asked Agricultural University No. 2 to try to help.

Agricultural University No. 2 had been evacuated to a mountain in Yen The District of Bac Ninh Province. We sincerely thanked Mr. The and with his letter of introduction traveled to the university, where we met the director – Mr. Nguyen Hoang, a southerner.

“According to the rules,” said Mr. Hoang, “we should not admit your daughter without her documents, nor should we admit a new student after the academic year has started. In light of her special circumstances, however, we are willing to admit her.”

So, with the help of Mr. The and Mr. Hoang, Ai Hoa was able to study at Agricultural University No. 2 until she graduated.

Hung applied to the Foreign Trade University. I saw that the situation was very difficult and was worried that he too would be excluded, so I told him to apply also to the Architectural University as a backup. For some reason unknown to me, however, Hung was admitted to the Foreign Trade University. That was a surprise! We were very happy for him. Hung studied there for two years and then went into the army for two years.

Cuong and Manh were still young during the war. They were still at school. Later Cuong attended the Danang Foreign Trade College.

Chien was only a young child during the war. He could not be evacuated with his brothers and sister, so he stayed at home with us. All of Hanoi's schools had been evacuated on account of the heavy American air raids, so we taught Chien at home. When the air raid alarm rang, we ran to the shelter. When the all clear sounded, we resumed his lessons. He learned more and more every day. He was a quick learner and made rapid progress.

Despite the tension and hardship of people's lives, our family still lived in comfort. We made enough money to help many other people as well. Among them was Mr. Dang Hoan Ban, head of the United Association of Overseas Chinese. He came to ask me to lend him money. Out of consideration for a fellow southerner and respect for his age, I was glad to help him. I had just received a royalty of 30 old dong. It was not yet warm in my pocket, but I lent it all to him. I did not suspect that even many months and years later he would still not have paid me back. After the South was liberated and the country united, he and his wife took their children to the South to visit relatives. His relatives gave him a car. When his family arrived in Danang, I arranged for a goods truck belonging to my company to take his family back to Hanoi. On the way to Hanoi, Kim Anh used her own pocket money to buy food and drink for his family. Still he did not repay the loan.

While he was in Danang, he said to me: “Mr. Quang, I owe you 30 dong.”

Happily expecting repayment, I replied: “That's right.”

But he did not hand me any money and did not even thank me. Really strange!

Out of respect for his old age, however, we did not reproach him. For the whole time we lived in Hanoi, he always remembered our favor to him and came

with his wife and children at the New Year to wish us a happy new year. That was a warm source of comfort to us.

Another fellow southerner was Mr. Phan Chinh Giang, a secretary at the Vietnamese embassy in North Korea. In the absence of the ambassador, Mr. Le Thiet Hung, who had returned to Vietnam for medical treatment, he was appointed acting chargé d'affaires. He was received by prime minister Kim Il Sung, thereby gaining everlasting fame. Regretfully, his glory was short-lived because for some reason the Ministry of Foreign Affairs suddenly ordered his immediate return to Vietnam. When he arrived in Beijing on his way back, his wallet was full, but he still asked me to lend him money. Out of regard for his friendship, I lent him 20 Chinese yuan. It was a small amount but it had taken me a long time to save it, because each employee working abroad received only half a yuan a day for pocket money.

When I returned to Vietnam I often visited him, but he never mentioned this loan. He seemed to have forgotten about it. Now he and his family have settled in the United States and he has still not mentioned it. Really strange! In life one comes across some strange people like that.

When I sit eating with friends, I recall these old stories and think how stupid I was. Mr. Phan Chinh Giang was a high-ranking official. He had higher pay than me. He was returning from a foreign country and must have been carrying plenty of money. What was the matter with me? Why did I have to lend him 20 yuan? With that money I could have bought a lot of presents for my wife and children. Life is full of surprises. Friendship is very difficult to understand. We care about people but they never care about us.

Kim Anh was sincere, courageous, and generous. If she had any good food, she would share it with neighbors and friends until they had left. She did not save any for later. Every Sunday a number of relatives and friends came around for a meal or for tea and to join in happy talk. Our life went on like that for twenty years. Everyone loved and praised Kim Anh. They always said that we were a happy family. Mr. Han Nam Vien used to say that he had never known any woman as good as Mrs. Kim Anh. When he visited China, he met Chinese Mother and sister Neo and told them too how good Kim Anh was.

Regretfully, when the situation changed people's feelings also changed. After the South was liberated, we returned to Qui Nhon. Our family's standard of living was lower there than it had been in Hanoi. It was also lower than the standard of living of our friends. When they had regrouped to the North, the members of their families had remained in the South doing business. They were rich – they had TVs, fridges, Honda motorcycles, and so on. Our family had none of those things, so they ignored us and treated us as strangers. When they passed us by, they pretended not to notice us and did not exchange greetings, even though

our house was close to the main road. For many years none of our close friends came to visit. Even people who had reason to be grateful for our help never showed up at our door. Only Mr. Ngo Khon Phuc remained our loyal friend.

As the proverb says: “The rich can live in the jungle and mountains and many people will still come to visit them. The poor can live in the middle of the marketplace, but nobody knows them.” Another proverb says: “If you have wine and meat, then you will have friends too. When the wine and meat are gone, the friends will also be gone.” That is exactly what the world is like!

However, our family were still willing to help others, especially northerners who had come to the South to work or study, so we were still comforted.

Notes

[1] In the Red River Delta, about 25-30 kilometers from Hanoi.

[2] Agricultural University No. 1 was for students from northern families. Agricultural University No. 2 was for students whose families came from the South. After the unification of Vietnam, such institutional duplication was abandoned. Agricultural University No. 2 was merged into the University of Hue.

Chapter 32. Return to the South

As soon as Danang was liberated, the Ministry of Foreign Trade sent Mr. Nguyen Duan and Mr. Dinh Trac to Zone V to investigate the foreign trade situation and discuss foreign trade prospects with Zone V party leaders. After they reported back to the ministry leadership, it was decided to send a group of cadres to do foreign trade work in the South Midlands. I was a member of this group.

At this time I was working at an import-export company in Lao Cai Province in Vietnam’s mountainous northwest. When I received the order to return to work in the South, I was very happy and felt highly honored. I was happy because I would soon be seeing my old mother, sisters, brothers-in-law, and many other relatives after a separation of twenty years. I felt honored because I was one of the first people to return to the South after liberation. I returned to Hanoi to prepare for the journey and make arrangements for my family. Then I attended a course entitled “New Situation, New Responsibilities.”

Our group, consisting of over thirty people, was headed by my old boss from the General Transit Company, Mr. Nguyen Duan. The deputy heads were Mr. Dinh Trac, director of the General Marine Products Import-Export Company, and Mr. Nguyen Kieu, former counselor for commercial affairs at the Vietnamese embassy in Hungary.

The tasks of our group were to establish an import-export company in Danang, take over private import-export companies in the South Midlands, help the provinces of Quang Nam, Nghia Binh, Phu Khanh, Gia Lai, Kon Tum, and Dac Lac establish their own import-export companies, and train their staff to build up those companies.

The group set off from Hanoi at seven in the morning on May 6, 1975. A fierce storm was raging. The ministry leadership told Mr. Duan to delay departure until the storm abated, but he paid no heed. He was determined to get going.

“Even in the heaviest rain and the strongest wind,” he proclaimed, “we must leave on time!”

Mr. Duan, his two deputies, and a few other leading cadres rode in a jeep, while the rest of us traveled in two trucks. The jeep led the way and the trucks tried to keep up. And so, braving heavy rain and strong wind, we headed south.

Soaked to the skin and shivering with cold like bedraggled chickens, we begged Mr. Duan to let us take shelter somewhere for a while.

“Ha!” he jeered, “you call yourselves revolutionaries, and yet you fear the wet and cold! Forward! Follow me!”

Fortunately, by the time we reached Ha Tinh we had left the storm behind us. Now it was hot and sunny. We dried out our clothes and continued on our way.

About six or seven in the evening we reached Vinh City. However, instead of taking us to the reception station, the driver of the jeep took the wrong road. He had driven another 40—50 kilometers toward Nghe An Province before he realized his mistake. He told Mr. Duan, but Mr. Duan refused to believe him.

“Listen to me!” he yelled. “Forward!”

We continued along another stretch of road. Then the jeep ran out of gasoline. Mr. Duan told us all to get down off the trucks and push the jeep. We pushed and pushed until we were too tired to push any more. We stopped to rest.

Just then, luckily for us, a military truck approached from the south. Mr. Duan stopped the truck and asked for directions. Only then did he realize that we had taken the wrong road. He asked the soldiers for a can of gasoline. We turned our vehicles around and went off in search of the reception station. By the time we got there it was nine o’clock.

It was a Saturday night and there was only one person on duty at the reception station. Mr. Duan explained why we were there and asked him to provide us with food and accommodation.

He replied: “Your group did not warn us that you were coming. We were not expecting you. It’s Saturday night. Everyone else has gone home, only I am here. We have no food for you. If we had some I would give it to you, but we do not.”

We were very disappointed. We did not know what to do. We returned to our vehicles and went looking for the Nghe Tinh Import-Export Company. The company had been evacuated to a place at a considerable distance from Vinh City. At last we found it. The situation there was the same as at the reception station. There was no food, but fortunately there was a place for us to sleep. Still hungry, we lay down on the floor to sleep. The next morning we went out to buy something to eat. The only food that we could find was polenta. We filled our stomachs and resumed our journey.

Before we set off again, Mr. Duan told us: "We shall soon be entering the liberated zone. We must take heightened precautions. The enemy may try to kill us by putting poison in our food. None of you are allowed to buy your own food from roadside vendors. Remember to follow the code of conduct."

Then Mr. Duan and his deputies got in the jeep and led the way to the south. We followed in the trucks. Somehow the jeep must have taken a wrong turn, because we lost sight of it as we continued straight ahead. About noon our trucks arrived on the outskirts of Hue City. We were very hungry, but we did not want to tell the driver to enter the city because we were afraid of being harmed by the enemy. Anyway, we had to obey the orders of the head of the group. So hungry we had to remain.

The trucks halted at the corner of the bridge across the Perfume River. We waited several hours but still saw no sign of the jeep. We thought that perhaps the jeep had gone far ahead and we had failed to keep up. We told the drivers to go on to Danang. There we found the company office for Zone V.

After talking with the office secretary, we realized that the jeep had not yet arrived. We explained the situation to him and asked for food and accommodation.

He replied: "The Hoi An District Reception Committee is responsible for your group. We had no advance warning, so we were not expecting you. Today is Sunday. I am the only one on duty here. The others are at home. Fortunately, we still have some bread for you to eat."

We were again very disappointed, but after two hungry days it was good to have at least a little bread to line our stomachs. Then we lay down on the floor to sleep. The jeep finally showed up at noon the next day. We could not understand why it had taken them so long. What had happened to them? We were very worried. In answer to our questions Mr. Duan told this funny story.

The driver of the jeep had lost his way on the approaches to Hue City. They had gone round and round until about three or four o'clock they reached the city outskirts. Mr. Duan told the driver to stop and spoke with an officer of the traffic police, who told him that he had seen two trucks pass by and that the trucks had the letters TCTXNKBG painted on them. Mr. Duan, however, did not believe him. He reasoned that the trucks must have gone more slowly than the jeep, so the trucks

could not possibly have arrived first. Paying no heed to the police officer, he told the driver to turn the jeep round and go back northward to look for us. They went as far as the Hien Luong Bridge at the boundary between North and South Vietnam, but of course there was no sign of us. Only then did he tell the driver to return southward. They reached Hue City at about eight or nine in the evening.

By this time the other passengers in the jeep were very hungry and asked Mr. Duan to let them go and buy some food. He ordered them to beware of the enemy and stay in the jeep.

“But we are so hungry,” they pleaded. “We can’t bear it.”

“You make revolution and yet you fear hunger?”

They cried and moaned, but they had to obey. When night fell, Mr. Duan, still afraid that the enemy would harm them, ordered them all to sleep in the jeep.

The next morning, having still not spotted our trucks, Mr. Duan decided to wait no longer and told the driver to proceed to Danang. As I said, they arrived at noon.

On the previous trip that Mr. Duan and Mr. Trac had taken to the South to investigate the situation, they had not discussed matters thoroughly with the leaders of the Zone V party committee. As a result, there was no concrete plan and it was hard for our group to find food and accommodation. Empty houses in Danang were allocated to cadres from the North on a first-come first-served basis. No house was available for us. Mr. Duan then had many meetings with Mr. Tam Tu, secretary of the Zone V party committee, using their connection as natives of the same area. As a result, we were offered temporary accommodation.

The house to which we were sent was not very big and had an aluminum roof. It was hot in Danang at that time of year and there was not enough fresh water. We were like an anthill in a frying pan. We just could not bear the heat. We asked the group leaders to solve the problem.

“You make revolution,” sneered Mr. Duan, “and yet you fear heat and hardship. We must live like this in order to show our sympathy with the suffering of the poor people of the South. We must absolutely obey the party.”

To this no one dared object.

Later, Mr. Tam Tu came to visit us and saw the hard conditions in which we were living. He provided us with another house next to his own. This house, however, had no water supply. We had to go to his house to fetch water. It was very inconvenient. Mr. Tam Tu’s staff did not like us coming in for water. Whenever we started to fill our bucket, they would come and turn off the faucet. We talked about it loudly with one another and reported the matter to Mr. Tam Tu. Mr. Duan heard about this and criticized us for reporting directly to a higher-level

leader. That, he said, was going too far. Mr. Tam Tu also criticized his staff and that did help, because from then on we were able to fetch water freely.

When we had just arrived in the South, the company did not have enough provisions for us. We ate rotten and moldy food that had been stored for many years as reserves in the war zone. At each meal we had a small and very smelly flying fish as wide and long as three middle fingers held together. At breakfast each person received a small bread roll made from old flour and containing a lot of insects. You could see the insects in the bread. We were scared to death! But we had just arrived in the liberated zone and had to act as role models, so no one dared say a word. I closed my eyes and tried to swallow the bread, but I was often unable to do so. The canteen staff saw my misery and felt so sorry for me that they told me to give them some money to buy extra food to cook for me. However, some members of the group were jealous and queried the arrangement, so I abandoned it. When I had money, I went to eat at a small restaurant. That made my life less miserable.

Due to the shortage of provisions, we were not eating enough to fill our stomachs. Outside working hours some cadres socialized with Mr. Duan and took the opportunity to tell him that their stomachs were not full.

“Go and buy a chicken,” he replied, “and make chicken and rice soup. Chickens here are very cheap. Chicken and rice soup is nutritious and saves on rice. I too eat chicken and rice soup.”

At that everyone held their stomachs and laughed until they cried. We were, alas, ordinary cadres with a monthly salary of only a few dozen [northern] dong. How could we afford to eat chicken and rice soup like him?

We had been in the North for over twenty years. Now that the South was liberated, we all hoped to visit our relatives soon. After our arrival in Danang, however, Mr. Duan told us that we had to start our work immediately. He did not allow us to visit our relatives. This made us unhappy, angry, discontented, and reluctant to work. Luckily, we got help from Mr. Nguyen Trong, permanent representative of the Ministry of Foreign Trade in the South Midlands. He was kind and sympathetic. He asked Mr. Duan to give us two weeks' leave to visit our relatives. At last, after twenty years, we were going to see our relatives again. We were overjoyed!

Arriving in Dap Da, I got down from the bus in front of Mr. Dong Loi's house. I looked around me. The town had changed. Mr. Dong Loi's house used to be the biggest in Dap Da, but now it seemed small by comparison with the houses of other neighbors. In the past, most of the houses in Dap Da had had straw roofs; only a few roofs were made of tile. Now none of the houses had straw roofs; all

roofs were made of brick or tile. Many new buildings had appeared. The road had been widened.

I looked and looked, but could not recognize my surroundings or even find my house. I wandered in front of Mr. Dong Loi's house, took a look inside, and saw a young man who resembled my nephew Ngo. I guessed that he was Mr. Dong Loi's son, so I entered, greeted him, and asked who he was. I was right: his name was Dong and he was Ngo's younger brother.

Mr. Dong Loi happened to be out, but Ngo's younger sister Dung was there, busy selling herbal medicines. When she heard me inquire, her face lit up with happiness. She told her brother to take me to the house of my sister Hanh to meet my mother.

I had returned to Dap Da in the uniform of the National Liberation Front (NLF). When I showed up at Hanh's house, she was busy selling goods. She did not have time to take a good look at me and I did not recognize her. When my mother saw me enter, however, she recognized me at once. She burst into tears of joy, took my hand, and pulled me up the stairs. I did not have time to greet Hanh. My mother and I were reunited after twenty years. We were sad and happy at the same time. We could not stop crying or say a word. I looked at her and saw that she was still in good health. I was overjoyed and felt at peace.

Having completed her sale, Hanh wondered why her mother had taken some strange NLF man upstairs and went upstairs to see for herself. She was surprised to discover that it was her older brother Hai.^[1] My sister and I were also very happy to see one another. After a while Mr. Dong Loi turned up. He too was overjoyed. He hugged me and cried. We had not met for many years and now we were reunited. How happy we were! We could not hold back our tears.

Then I went to see my other younger sister Bon.^[2] She cried and told me that her husband, Mr. Kiem, had worked for the southern puppet government. Now he had been arrested and taken to a district re-education camp. She asked me to help him by going to visit him and giving him some comfort. I felt awkward and embarrassed. If I visited Mr. Kiem I would receive a disciplinary penalty, because before we set off for the South the leadership had strictly forbidden us to make contact with personnel of the previous puppet government even if they were close relatives. However, I also felt uneasy about not visiting my brother-in-law. Eventually I did decide to visit him. My mother and sisters were very glad to learn of my decision. They saw me as a good person who knew how to behave well and love his family.

I also went to visit other relatives, elders, and local Overseas Chinese and Vietnamese friends. Relatives and friends were all moved to tears and thought very highly of me. They said that I had a loyal heart and knew how to balance feeling

with duty. They called me a real Confucian scholar who understands the affairs of this world and loves people. A precious person!

I stayed two weeks with my family. Before leaving, I went to visit my brother-in-law Mr. Kiem one more time. After returning to Danang, I took time off every Sunday to go to Dap Da to visit my relatives until I was sent to work permanently in Qui Nhon.

Before Kim Anh and I went to the North, we had given our herbal store, together with all its contents, to Mr. Lim Quang. After a while Mr. Lim Quang had left for Qui Nhon and given the store to his wife's brother, Mr. Diep Bao Dong. Then Mr. Dong had given it to Mr. Han Han Nguyen, who had given it to his wife's brother, Mr. Chau Kinh Cang. While minding the business, Mr. Cang had also collaborated with the local puppet government, harassing and tormenting old families that had been active in the Anti-French Resistance and relatives of people who had gone to the North. When the South was liberated, he had given the keys to the house and store to his sister Phung and gone into hiding in Saigon. He had told Mrs. Phung to await my return and hand the house and store back to me in good condition. When Mrs. Phung heard that I had arrived in Danang, she came to see me right away and gave me back the keys.

So our house had passed through many hands and finally come back to us. We were really happy. Sister Hanh used her own money to restore the house for our mother to live in. Now that she had the house, mother was very happy. Her livelihood was secure and her life was complete. She no longer had any cause for worry.

Mr. Bon Dan Loi was living in Saigon. He was very happy to hear that I had come back to Danang and would soon be in Qui Nhon. He went to Qui Nhon and waited for me there for a few days, but being very busy he asked Mr. Lim Quang to call him at once if he saw me and then returned to Saigon. When eventually I did arrive in Qui Nhon he came to see me. Now, after so many years, we met again. He threw a party for me at his house and asked me to stay overnight so that we could catch up with one another's news. We talked all night until morning came and were still not tired. He confessed to me that he was worried:

"The revolutionaries are back. What will happen to the wealthy now?"

I reassured him and told him not to worry:

"When I was in Hanoi, Mr. Nguyen Trung Tin, chairman of the People's Council of Binh Dinh Province, came to the North. He told us that he was someone who shows his gratitude to those who have helped the southern revolution, as you have."^[3]

Mr. Dan Loi gave me a detailed account of his activities and situation. I told him that he did not have any serious problem. If some trouble arose, he could

mention his connection with me. He could say that he had a brother who had joined the revolution and was working in Hanoi. That would count in his favor. I also sincerely advised him not to join any Overseas Chinese organizations. At that time, however, I dared not tell him about the hostility of the Vietnamese leadership to the Overseas Chinese.

While we were talking, Mr. Dan Loi surreptitiously put a thick wad of banknotes into my jacket pocket. When I said goodbye to him in the morning, he told me that there were 100,000 dong in my pocket. It was a gift for me to use right away. If I needed some more money later, I should tell his assistant, who often went to Danang to collect money for him, and he would give me more. I should not hesitate to ask. He would tell his assistant to go and see me whenever he was in Danang.

I thanked him profusely. I could see that he loved me very much and treated me like a blood brother. Later, with the help of two taels of gold that Mr. Dan Loi gave me and several taels that my sister Hanh gave me, I bought a house at No. 38, Nguyen Du Street in Danang.

Some time after the liberation of the South, a noisy campaign to reform private trade began in Saigon. The majority of trading companies were checked. Houses and properties were confiscated. The police conducted sudden night raids on the houses of Overseas Chinese, arrested them, and took them away. Saigon was turned upside down. People were anxious and confused. They trembled with fear and were unable to eat or sleep. But for some reason Mr. Dan Loi and his company were not touched. He believed that this was thanks to me. He told me that I was a good and trustworthy person.

When I visited my mother in Dap Da, she was holding some gold in her hand. She offered it to me and told me to use it. I did not take it. I told her to keep it for her old age.

I went up to Quang Ngai to visit my Aunt Du and her husband. My cousin Kham told Aunt Du: "Please take out a few taels of the gold I asked you to keep and give them to Cousin Hai. He is very poor."

I thanked him but declined. I told him to save the gold to look after his old parents, wives, and children.

I added: "I have just returned on my own and don't need much."

"If you don't want gold," he continued, "let me give you my motorcycle." He had just bought himself a new Honda motorcycle.

"Thank you," I replied, "but I won't take it. I dare not ride a motorcycle."

So I took nothing from Mr. Kham.

Mr. Tam Loc, my wife's very wealthy brother, came to visit me one day.

"I would like," he said, "to give my sister a few taels of gold to spend."

I sincerely thanked him, but told him: "Please wait until Kim Anh returns home and give your gift directly to her. It will make her happy. I have only just arrived and don't need much."

He agreed. When Kim Anh returned home from Hanoi, her brother invited her to come and visit him in Pleiku. She went up to visit him and his family, but he gave her nothing – not a single cent. She had long understood his real attitude, so it did not upset her.

My cousin Mr. Thanh Quang gave me some jewelry and pocket money.

"In the old days," he said, "you gave our family a lot of help. We shall never forget it. Now our business is doing well and we have a high standard of living. If you are ever in need of money, just ask me. Don't hesitate."

His mother, Aunt Bang Mai, also loved me very much.

"I know," she said, "that you have suffered hardship in the North. My son keeps my money for me. I've asked him to give you some."

I thanked her and my cousin for their kind hearts. When later I returned to work in Qui Nhon, I often visited them and they often gave me pocket money.

Mr. Lim Quang presented me with a bicycle made in Saigon. His wife, Mrs. Lanh, treated me very well.

She said: "It is already over twenty years since we saw you. Now that you have at last returned to Qui Nhon, please buy a house here near to us."

"I have only just come home," I replied. "I don't have any money yet."

"My husband has money. Please ask him to give you some."

"I dare not."

"Then I shall ask him."

She was as good as her word. Her husband offered me a tael of gold leaves.

At the beginning of 1979, the Vietnamese authorities allowed Mr. Lim Quang and his whole family to leave the country. Hardly had their boat set off, however, than it had an accident. They had to go back to Qui Nhon. I came to visit them and returned the tael of gold leaves.

I told Mr. Lim Quang: "I haven't yet used the gold you gave me. Now you are back again and I worry that you may not have enough money. So I am returning the gold to you."

"There is no need," he replied. "I was unlucky and got caught in an accident, but I still have enough money left for my requirements. Keep it. Use it to take care of your old mother and your wife and children."

I tried to give him back the gold many times, but each time he refused. So I gave up.

Kim Anh and I went to Qui Nhon to visit our nephew Mr. Kinh Van and his family. He and his wife welcomed us very warmly.

“You have been living a hard life in the North for over twenty years,” he told us. “Now you should re-establish your old business, so that you can live better.”

“A business needs capital,” I pointed out. “I have only just returned home and have no capital.”

“That is no problem. We can help you with that.”

I thanked him. Later he and his wife opened a store, invited us to a party to celebrate the occasion, and gave us each spending money.

My old friend Miss Au Nguyet Hoa was very nice to us. When she heard that I was coming to work in Qui Nhon and did not have a house to live in, she told me: “I have a house in Qui Nhon. Now I live in Saigon and hardly ever come to Qui Nhon, so I would like to give you my house there.”

I was very happy to see her and thanked her. But at that time I had not yet returned to Qui Nhon, so I did not take her house. She let our daughter Ai Nga live there. The house was too big for one person, however, and soon Ai Nga began to feel lonesome. She left the house and gave it back to Miss Hoa, who later sold it to Mr. Ton Nhan Tuan.

When I finally did come to Qui Nhon, Miss Hoa heard that I wanted to buy a house and immediately gave me 800 dong in new currency,^[4] equivalent to half a tael of gold, as a contribution to the cost of a house. As I was not yet in a position to buy a house, I tried to return the money to her with my thanks, but she was determined that I should keep it.

In 1979, Miss Hoa left for France and took up residence in Paris. I wrote her a letter, asking to come to France and visit her, but as she never replied I did not go. I shall always be grateful to her.

I lived in Danang for a while. Kim Anh brought Ai Nga and Chien from Hanoi to visit me. I took them to Saigon to visit my Uncle Bon (Mr. Bon Nghi Nguyen) and other relatives and friends. By this time Uncle Bon was old and weak. While the Americans were in the South, he told us, he and his wife and children had made a good living and saved enough money to build a two-story house. He showed us round his house.

“For the time being,” he said, “our family is living well. Our only problem is that our eldest son Loi, who used to be an officer in the Saigon puppet army, has been arrested and is still in a re-education camp.”

About three years later, Uncle Bon fell sick and passed away. After that I went to Saigon many times to visit Aunt Bon and her family. At the end of 1978 or thereabouts, Aunt Bon told me that her youngest son Son had fled by boat and settled in the United States. I told Loi, who had just been released from the re-education camp, that he too should flee. However, he dared not.

“I’ve only just been released from the camp,” he said. “If my escape fails, it would be tragic.”

In 1991, when I went to visit my hometown in Hainan, I ran across a friend who was visiting from Saigon. Cousin Khon Quang, Uncle Hai’s son, asked him to help find Uncle Bon’s family, because they had just heard that Aunt Bon and Cousin Loi and his family had emigrated to the United States. Later Cousin Loi sent a letter to Cousin Khon Quang. Using the address shown on this letter, I then wrote to Aunt Bon and Cousin Loi in the United States and told them about our ancestor.

Later Cousin Loi replied: “In the old days I had two sisters and three brothers. Our father never let us know our nationality or who our ancestor was. Our parents often used to go to the Midlands on business, but they never mentioned any relatives or talked about Hainan. Now that I have read your letter I understand. My elder sister and I have Han as our family name, but the family name of my other sister and my two brothers is Lu – our mother’s family name. I don’t know why.”

After Cousin Loi found out about his ancestor, he often sent money to help Cousin Khon Quang. Up to 1996, Loi gave him altogether US \$700. It was good of Loi to do that. Cousin Loi was better than his father.

During our stay in Saigon we also visited Mr. Bon Dan Loi and his family. He and his wife welcomed us enthusiastically, spent a whole day showing us around Saigon, and threw a party for us.

After that we went to visit an elderly friend of mine by the name of Mr. Ngo Van Chuong – Mr. Tu Chuong for short. He was already over eighty years old. His experience of the revolution went back to the 1930s. During the Anti-French Resistance War, he had worked as an underground agent in Saigon. When he and Mr. Le Duan were exposed by the French colonial regime, he had sold all his possessions and helped Mr. Le Duan to escape. Then he and his wife had escaped to Cambodia and gone into hiding there, although his wife had later returned to Saigon. After the departure of the French, the Vietnamese government had arranged for him to go to the North for medical treatment. While living in Hanoi he had been a deputy in the National Assembly. He was kind and good-natured and had a calm manner, so it was easy to get close to him. Living in Hanoi by himself, with nothing to do except daily activities, he had been sad and lonesome and we were very concerned about him. We had treated him as our own relative and helped and taken care of him in many ways. A very strong and special bond had formed between him and us. He had loved and respected us as his main benefactors. After the South was liberated, he had returned to Saigon. He had told his relatives that when he was in Hanoi we had looked after him and given him

much comfort and happiness. He had felt as much at home with us as with his own family.

When Mr. Tu Chuong saw us, he greeted us warmly. He reminisced about old times and thanked us.

After visiting Mr. Tu Chuong, we returned to Mr. Bon Dan Loi's house. Then Mr. Tu Chuong came with his chauffeur and took us to see many places in Saigon, ending with a meal in a restaurant. We were very moved.

After our stay in Saigon we returned to Dap Da. From there Kim Anh went back to Hanoi, while Ai Nga and Chien stayed on in Dap Da with their grandmother. The next year Ai Nga married Mr. Au Quynh Hoa, a native of Dap Da. On July 1, 1978, Ai Nga gave birth to a son named Au Bang Loi. On June 6, 1979, they left Vietnam and settled in the United States.

Notes

[1] *Hai* means “number two.” In South Vietnam it is a common name for the firstborn child in a family. It would be regarded as unlucky to call a firstborn child “number one.”

[2] *Bon* means “number four.”

[3] Mr. Bon Dan Loi had given considerable financial assistance to the NLF.

[4] The new national currency was launched on September 22, 1975 at the rate of one dong of the new currency for 500 dong of the old currency.

Chapter 33. At the South Midlands import-export company

When our foreign trade group arrived in Da Nang, we immediately took over the Phuc Tho Duong Herbal Exports Store. At the same time, the Ministry of Public Health took over the Phuc Tho Duong Herbal Medicine Store.

Soon after this, Mr. Phan Chinh Hoa, the owner of these two stores, came to see us (I knew who he was, but he did not know me). He asked us to allow him to continue his export business with our assistance.

Our group leaders and I told him: “Now that the South is liberated, private export businesses are no longer allowed.”

All of his assets were expropriated and divided among related companies. He saw the writing on the wall and found a way to flee the country and go to Hong Kong.

One noontime, as I was taking a nap at the residence for company personnel, a woman I did not know came looking for me. When she saw me, she asked:

“Are you Mr. Han Hing Quang?”

“Yes. What’s the matter?”

“I’m Mrs. Kim, the wife of Mr. Ngo Tan Dan. Why did you let him marry another woman in the North?”

“I knew nothing about it.”

“You’re lying. You and Mr. Dan lived in the same city. How could you not have known?”

“It’s true that Mr. Dan and I both lived in Hanoi. We knew one another. But much of the time I was away. So I really did not know. I only heard him say that you had stayed behind to work in the South and had died at the hands of the enemy. He said that you had sacrificed yourself for the cause. He was very lonesome, so he remarried.”

“In what sort of activity was I involved that I should die at the hands of the enemy. You are all in this together! Even Mr. Ngo Khon Dao and Mr. Khon Phuc act as his henchmen!”

When she had finished, she let out a loud sigh of indignation, stamped her feet, and left. This was a very funny story!

It was the responsibility of our company to organize an import-export company in each province of the South Midlands and train personnel for each of these companies, giving them some basic knowledge of foreign trade. Once these companies were established and their personnel trained, they would be sent to their respective provinces to take up their duties.

Our group stayed in Danang for a while and set up an import-export company for the South Midlands. The director was Mr. Nguyen Duan, the deputy directors were Mr. Dinh Trac and Mr. Nguyen Kieu, and I was head of the planning office.

The situation inside the company was very complicated. Mr. Duan was a good-natured, honest, and generous man with a pleasant, relaxed, and calm manner, considerate and friendly toward his staff. Mr. Kieu was also fair, straightforward, and relaxed. If anything was wrong, then he would say so immediately. Mr. Trac, however, was cunning, sneaky, mean, narrow-minded, and malevolent.

During work breaks we senior staff used to discuss company affairs. Mr. Duan often said that our company should be allowed to export goods directly to foreign countries without having to go through the national company. It would save time and expense. Mr. Kieu disagreed. Mr. Trac kept his silence. Mr. Duan

and Mr. Kieu were only engaging in casual talk. They were not expressing their formal views. But Mr. Trac, ever since he had come to Danang, had been plotting to overthrow Mr. Duan and usurp his position. He secretly reported these casual conversations to the leadership of the Ministry of Foreign Trade. Spicing things up, he wrote:

“Mr. Duan’s thinking is infected with localism. He wants to assert his independence of the central government. Mr. Kieu foments internal divisions and often argues with Mr. Duan.”

Mr. Trac’s report alarmed the ministry leadership. Feeling no need to find out whether it was right or wrong, they immediately issued a directive for Mr. Duan to retire and another directive for Mr. Kieu to return to Hanoi for appointment to a different post. Mrs. Nguyen Thi Hien, deputy head of the personnel department, was sent to Danang to talk with Mr. Duan about the ministry’s decisions. When she arrived Mr. Duan was in Nha Trang on business, so Mrs. Hien continued her journey that same night to Nha Trang to find Mr. Duan.

The ministry directive struck Mr. Duan like a thunderbolt. He looked haggard, as though he were almost out of his mind or had accidentally swallowed a piece of soap. He did not understand why he had suddenly been dismissed. With no way out, he silently accepted the decision.

I felt sorry for Mr. Duan. All his life he had been loyal to the party and the revolution. All he knew was how to struggle for the revolutionary idea. He had followed the true path and given no thought to his personal interest. He could not believe that his own colleague had betrayed him. Now he had to hand over his directorship to Mr. Dinh Trac. He departed with no drums or trumpets to proclaim his glory.

As the proverb says: “You can draw the tiger, you can draw the skin, but you cannot draw the bone. You can see a person’s face, but you cannot see his heart.”

Mr. Kieu was even more pitiful. He had previously worked as commercial attaché at the Vietnamese embassy in Hungary. His wife had had a permanent job in Hanoi and his children had been doing well at school. His family’s standard of living had been stable. After coming to Danang, he thought that he could put down roots in his home area and help make it prosperous and beautiful. So he brought his wife and children to Danang. Scarcely had he been able to make arrangements for his family, however, when suddenly he was ordered to return to Hanoi. He too almost lost his mind. He only managed to find a temporary job for his wife as a worker at a woolen carpet factory in Danang to tide his family over until his problem could be solved.

As for Mr. Dinh Trac, he had hit the jackpot. He rose up like a kite that has caught the wind. With the departure of Mr. Duan and Mr. Kieu, he became company director. In the space of a single year, his salary had been raised three

times – first when he went to the South, a second time when he was promoted to director, and the third time when the company was dissolved upon his retirement. He was like a dog that yawns and catches a fly.

I was engaged in official business for over twenty years. I saw a lot of good things and a lot of bad things. My range of vision widened. I saw that leading cadres were no better than anyone else. Many of them were greedy, mean, and cruel, devoid of regret or remorse, willing to weave wicked plots and use any dirty means to reach their dark goal. Some were even ready to sell their souls and commit unspeakable acts to harm people.

After Mr. Kieu returned to Hanoi, the Zone V party committee appointed Mr. Nguyen Hai deputy director of the South Midlands Import-Export Company. Mr. Nguyen Hai was a political cadre. During the Anti-French Resistance War and the War Against America to Save the Nation he had always worked in the war zone. When the liberation of the South was complete, he had returned to Danang. He was good-natured, honest, pleasant, and sympathetic to his subordinates, but he was not a professional in the field of foreign trade. It was Mr. Dinh Trac who controlled all the work of the company and made all the decisions.

Mr. Duan was my old director. I had worked with him for many years. He understood, liked, and trusted me. I felt sorry for him in his current predicament. After retiring he would often drop by at the company offices to chat with us. It gave him pleasure and made him feel less sad.

One day I jokingly said to him: “Dear director, for many years I followed you in our work for the revolution. We understood one another. Now you are retired and famous, successful and fulfilled. So part of you must feel comforted. But part of me is still in turmoil. Even now my family is not reunited, alas! Please tell me your whole life story. I shall write your memoirs for you and you can keep them for your children to read, so that they will know what life was like for their parents’ generation.”

He immediately brushed off the idea. “That is enough!” he exclaimed. “Don’t you dare write down those crazy stories!”

Hearing this, Mr. Hai held his tummy and laughed. “This Mr. Quang!”

Having established the South Midlands Import-Export Company, we proceeded to organize provincial import-export companies. One of these was the Quang Nam – Danang Provincial Import-Export Company, with Mr. Nguyen Thong as director.

Mr. Thong had previously been director of a Hanoi clothing company. He was an expert in the clothing industry, but knew nothing about foreign trade. He was wicked, wily, strong-willed, self-seeking, conceited, pretentious, and wildly ambitious. He was also extremely hostile to everyone outside his own circle.

As soon as he was appointed director, he announced: "I shall only take on cadres from Quang Nam and Danang. I don't want anyone from other provinces."

When Mr. Nguyen Khang, who had been appointed deputy director of the new company, heard this announcement, he told Mr. Thong:

"All the cadres in our group have ability. Some of them have fought in the army at the front. All of them have fought on the foreign trade front. We should treat them with respect. Even Mr. Duan, with all his experience, respected them. How much more should you respect them! Instead you are insulting them. It is just as though you were kicking your own leg."

Someone reported the argument to the leadership. The leaders of the Zone V party committee and the Quang Nam and Danang provincial party committees got angry and labeled Mr. Thong an "extreme divisive element." A few days later Mr. Thong received a directive ordering him to retire.

Mr. Thong was furious with himself for losing his position even before he had a chance to start work in it. He had said something wrong and someone had informed on him. Even though he got what he deserved, I still felt sorry for him.

Another company that we set up was the Nghia Binh Import-Export Company. The director was Mr. Tran Dung, the deputy director was Mr. Dao Trong Mien, and the head of the planning office was Mr. Nguyen Van Long.

Mr. Tran Dung had previously headed the personnel department at the Ministry of Foreign Trade. He had no experience in foreign trade or of direct personal contact with ordinary staff in other departments. He was narrow-minded, selfish, tricky, evasive, and malicious. All day long he seemed depressed, with never even a little smile on his face. He had no sympathy for his subordinates.

Mr. Dao Trong Mien had previously headed the administration department at the Ministry of Foreign Trade. He too knew nothing about foreign trade. However, he was good-natured and agreeable. He and I had known one another for a long time. When he took up his post in Qui Nhon, I asked for him to arrange for Ai Nga to work at his company. He was glad to oblige, and Ai Nga was taken on as the company accountant.

Mr. Nguyen Van Long had previously been a Level 4 technician in the exports department of the Ministry of Foreign Trade. He had experience in foreign trade. Mr. Long was cunning, malevolent, wildly ambitious, and an extreme anti-Chinese element. He made a great show of supporting and helping Mr. Dung while actually giving him misleading advice and taking advantage of his mistakes in the hope of eventually overthrowing him and becoming company director himself.

When Mr. Dung took up his post in Qui Nhon, I repeatedly asked him to allow Kim Anh and myself to work at his company. However, he and Mr. Long could never agree on the matter.

I had now been back in the South for over a year, but Kim Anh was still not allowed to join me. It made me feel uneasy. I did not know what to do. Kim Anh missed me and our relatives in the South very much. She was worried and anxious and imagined that I no longer cared for her or for the rest of the children. She put the blame on me, alas!

Mr. Tran Dung and Mr. Long were narrow-minded, anti-Chinese elements. They were prejudiced against Overseas Chinese cadres. On one occasion Chien came from Dap Da to Danang to visit me. It so happened that on the same day Mr. Dung and Mr. Long came from Qui Nhon to Danang by company car for a meeting. When it was time for them to return to Qui Nhon, I asked them whether Chien could go with them as far as Dap Da. They adamantly refused.

In 1976 I wanted to take some time off to visit my family in Hanoi. Company regulations allowed each employee ten days' leave a year. So I went to ask Deputy Director Hai for permission take leave.

"How many days do you need?" asked Mr. Hai.

"I am asking for ten days, in accordance with the regulations."

"You have a long journey ahead of you. You need more than ten days. You can have fifteen."

I was very happy to hear that. I sincerely thanked him for his concern.

When I returned from leave, I took Manh with me to Danang and then to Dap Da to stay with my old mother and give her some comfort.

While I was away in Hanoi, Mr. Dinh Trac had taken advantage of my absence to try to remove me from my post as head of the planning office. Although he had not yet received a ministry directive on the matter, he told Mr. Nguyen Chu to take over my office. Mr. Chu did so with alacrity. He thought that his big chance had come. Seeing no need for formalities, he openly moved into my office. Even more cynically, he cast aside all my documents, papers, stationery, and furniture, and brought in all his own things.

When I returned I saw what had happened.

"Why have you moved into my office?" I asked Mr. Chu.

"Director Trac told me to."

"Do you know what this office is for?"

He was unable to answer.

"You should know," I continued. "This is my office. If even Mr. Trac wants to come here, he has to ask me first."

That punctured his enthusiasm. He picked up his belongings right away and left. I never saw him in my office again. He reported the matter to Mr. Trac, who was very angry but kept his anger to himself, waiting for the right time to take revenge.

At one of our weekly meetings, Mr. Trac criticized me for taking longer leave than the company regulations allowed. I accepted the criticism. I did not want to explain myself, because I did not want to put Mr. Hai in a difficult position.

After the meeting I told Mr. Hai: “You knew very well about this matter. I really did nothing wrong.”

“That is Mr. Trac for you,” he replied. “He involves more people, pushes here, pushes there, and stirs up a storm in a teacup.”

Mr. Trac had criticized me, but he was not yet satisfied. He still hated me.

Mr. Dung and Mr. Long had been at the Nghia Binh Import-Export Company for over a year, but they had still not accomplished anything. On one occasion they came to Danang for a meeting about work plans. The meeting was attended by the deputy director of the personnel department at the Ministry of Foreign Trade. As head of the planning office of the South Midlands Import-Export Company, I also participated. I shared with them my ideas for conducting research and investigation to acquire a deep understanding of the market situation with a view to organizing the production of export goods.

Mr. Dung and Mr. Long immediately opposed my ideas. That made the man from the ministry very angry. His whole body turned red and he criticized them both:

“You don’t know how to do your job and Mr. Quang has the good heart to help you, but you refuse to listen!”

From then on, the leadership of the Ministry of Foreign Trade had a poor impression of Mr. Dung and Mr. Long. The leaders of Nghia Binh Province were also dissatisfied with them.

Another colleague of mine was Mr. Nguyen Tan Anh, a native of Phu My District of Nghia Binh Province. While in the North, he had worked in agriculture and been awarded the title of Labor Hero for Meritorious Service. He was very enthusiastic and hard-working, but had no understanding of foreign trade. He was also a bad and ambitious person. It so happened that the secretary of the Nghia Binh province party committee and the chairman of the Nghia Binh province people’s council were at that time, like him, natives of Phu My District. Taking advantage of this fact and knowing that the leaders of the province were dissatisfied with Mr. Dung and Mr. Long, Mr. Anh proposed a scheme to them. The result was that Mr. Dung was forced to retire immediately and Mr. Long sent to a different place, while Mr. Anh was promoted to the position of director of the Nghia Binh Province Import-Export Company. At one fell swoop Mr. Anh had seized Mr. Dung’s directorship.

Although he was now director, Mr. Anh did not yet have any professional staff to assist him.

Over the course of time, import-export companies were set up in all the provinces of our region. The Ministry of Foreign Trade therefore decided that the South Midlands Import-Export Company should be closed down and all its personnel reassigned to the import-export companies of their own provinces. Mr. Dinh Trac sent everyone except me to the appropriate provincial company. I repeatedly asked him to send me to the Nghia Binh Province Import-Export Company. The ministry leadership also told him to send me there, but he paid no heed. I became very worried.

At a staff meeting I said to him: "Everyone else has been assigned. What about me? Where do you intend to send me?"

"You returned from leave one week late," he replied. "You violated the regulations. I have imposed a disciplinary penalty and I am going to report the matter to the ministry."

I got very angry. "Fine," I retorted. "Go ahead and report it. I am not afraid of you. Go ahead and chop off my head!"

Everyone at the meeting was surprised to hear me say that. They could not believe that I had spoken out against the leader. They were all worried for me.

I thought to myself: "Returning a few days late from leave is not an important matter. A short verbal rebuke would have sufficed. Let him send me back to Hanoi. I wouldn't mind. Or let him send me to Saigon. I wouldn't mind that either. Or let him send me to Qui Nhon. That would be best of all. But wherever he sends me is fine with me. I am not afraid. If he doesn't need me anywhere, then someone else will need me. It doesn't matter."

Mr. Trac was himself surprised that I had stood up to him. He got angry. His face turned red. But he was afraid of losing face in front of his staff, so he made no reply. Secretly, however, he was determined to find a way to take his revenge.

Later friends told me that Mr. Trac had nursed a grudge against me for refusing to join him at the Marine Products Import-Export Company in Haiphong when he was director there. This was his way of getting even with me. So that was how this story began!

With the reassignment of all the other staff, only Mr. Trac and I were left at the South Midlands Import-Export Company. One day Mr. Trac told me to go to Saigon and ask the ministry representative there to allocate two tons of gasoline to our company. I took the opportunity to remind him:

"When I get back from Saigon, you must give me a new assignment and solve my housing problem without further delay."

He was still noncommittal: "When you get back we'll decide."

So I went to Saigon. With the help of old friends I obtained not two but five tons of gasoline. With that matter resolved, I went to visit Mr. Nguyen Quoc Thai, an old director of mine and also of Mr. Trac's. In Saigon he was a representative of the Ministry of Foreign Trade and director of the Food and Agricultural Products Import-Export Company. No sooner had I stepped into the company's offices than I ran into Mr. Ngo Can, the older brother of Mr. Ngo Lang and a native of Cam Tien Hamlet in Nhon Huong Municipality, which adjoins Dap Da. I recognized him, but he did not recognize me. He asked me where I was from.

"From the South Midlands Import-Export Company."

"Ah! Do you happen to know someone who works there by the name of Mr. Han Hing Quang?"

"I do."

"My director, Mr. Nguyen Quoc Thai, has told me to go to Danang and bring him back to work here. No matter what, I have to find him and bring him here."

I laughed.

"I am Mr. Han Hing Quang."

He didn't believe me.

"I've often heard his name, but I have never met him."

"Yes, you have. It really is me. Mr. Han Hing Quang from Dap Da."

At last he took me to Mr. Thai, who was very glad to see me. He stepped forward, shook my hand, greeted me, asked me to sit down, and gave me a drink of water.

"Mr. Quang," he said, "you have turned up at just the right moment. I need you here. In fact, I was going to send someone to Danang to bring you here to work with me. Later we can make a few trips abroad before we retire."

I was very happy to hear this and sincerely thanked him for his offer, but added:

"I am worried that Mr. Trac will not let me go."

"Oh, I can send him a directive. I am a representative of the ministry, after all."

He wrote a letter to Mr. Trac clearly stating that the ministry had decided to transfer me to the Food and Agricultural Products Import-Export Company in Saigon. I took the letter, thanked him again, and left.

On my return to Danang, I reported back to Mr. Trac and asked him where he intended to send me. He was still noncommittal. I could bear it no longer and handed him the letter from Mr. Thai.

When Mr. Trac had finished reading the letter, he said: "You must go to the Nghia Binh Import-Export Company. They are short of staff."

I was very happy to hear that. I thought to myself: “This old man is very sly, very tricky. He fears those above him and abuses those below him. If I keep submitting requests to him, he will make a lot of trouble for me and it will be easy for him to control me.”

I immediately asked him to give me a written directive to go to the Nghia Binh Import-Export Company.

So I would be able to work in Qui Nhon and live near my old mother and relatives. That gave me some satisfaction.

Ai Hoa was also in Qui Nhon. She had graduated from university and been assigned to work for the Agricultural Land Survey at the Nghia Binh Province People’s Council.

At about the same time, Mai and some others who had just graduated from the Foreign Trade University were assigned to undergo practical training at the Nghia Binh Import-Export Company.

Chapter 34. At the Nghia Binh Import-Export Company

At the beginning of 1977, I started work at the Nghia Binh Import-Export Company. The director was Mr. Nguyen Tan Anh; the deputy directors were Mr. Dao Trong Mien, Mr. Nguyen Dinh Thi, and Mr. Le Boi; and I was head of the planning office. Funnily enough, this group of leaders looked like an army unit.

Mr. Anh had been appointed by the party committee of Nghia Binh Province, Mr. Mien by the South Midlands Import-Export Company, and Mr. Thi by the Ministry of Foreign Trade. Mr. Le Boi had applied for his position himself and been appointed by the people’s council of Nghia Binh Province.

I had not been at the Nghia Binh Import-Export Company for very long when the company leaders decided that I should take the post of secretary of the company’s party organization. To be frank, since going to the North I had disliked working in positions of leadership. Such work involved a lot of trouble. The situation in the country at that time was extremely complicated and quite different from before, so I repeatedly refused. Eventually I was told: “This is a decision from above. As a party member you must obey.”

I knew that the party and government were now conducting an anti-China and anti-Chinese policy, but I also wanted to see what sort of game they wanted to play with me. So with some reluctance I accepted. I did not think that this was really an important post, but others believed that it put me in a dangerous position.

I requested the company leaders to arrange for Kim Anh to come and work at the company. They refused. They even claimed that Ai Nga did not have the right to reside in Qui Nhon and demanded that she quit her job.

That made me very angry. Being in a fighting mood, I said: "Fine, it's your right to decide. But I told you the truth. I joined the revolution because I wanted to struggle for communism, not because I was starving. Mrs. Lien here knows my personal history very well." (I was referring to Mrs. Nguyen Thi Lien, a company employee who was also from Dap Da.)

They did not reply.

Then I went to see Mrs. Nguyen Thi Hoa Kieu in the personnel department. I told her: "Unless the company leaders arrange for my wife to come and work at the company I cannot work here any more. I'll apply elsewhere."

She told me to give her Kim Anh's CV and said she would ask the province party committee to solve the problem. The province party committee immediately issued a directive to assign Kim Anh to work at the Nghia Binh Import-Export Company. Our family would be reunited at last. We were so happy.

I prepared to go to Hanoi to bring Kim Anh and Cuong back to Qui Nhon, but I was too busy with work and meetings to go right away. It so happened that around that time an employee by the name of Mr. Nguyen Son came to see me from the company's arts and crafts department. In a jocular tone he said to me:

"Please help me, chief! Recommend me to the leadership for promotion! I'll remember you forever."

"Don't joke. Who am I to recommend you?"

"I know you can do it. Please help me."

I laughed and laughed at the way he talked. When he was finished, I said:

"I heard that you are soon going to Hanoi. Is that true?"

"Yes, chief. If there's anything you'd like me to do, just tell me. I'll see to it for you. Don't worry."

That made me feel happy inside. I told Mr. Son:

"My wife is in Hanoi. Now the province party committee has reassigned her to work here. As you are going to Hanoi, please help me bring my wife and child here. Can you do that?"

"Yes, that's an easy job. I will certainly do it, chief. Don't worry."

I thanked him and promised: "Go ahead to Hanoi. When you return, I'll see what I can do for you."

Mr. Son thanked me. He was true to his word. He brought Kim Anh and Cuong back with him to Qui Nhon in his goods truck. They arrived safe and sound.

Kim Anh left Trung behind to continue his education in Hanoi. She started work at the Nghia Binh Import-Export Company. Cuong and Chien were admitted to school in Qui Nhon. Manh remained in Dap Da with his grandmother. We felt at peace.

Although Cuong had been assigned to Sung Nhon School in Qui Nhon, first he was sent to do productive labor for a month. Then they claimed that he was too old to attend school and refused to admit him. So I immediately applied for him to go to Danang Foreign Trade College. He studied there for a while, then he was sent to Dac Lac in the Central Highlands to collect and purchase coffee.

Hung had been in the army for about two years. When Trung heard that the government now had a policy of allowing all university students who had joined the army in the middle of their studies to return to university to complete their courses, he filled in an application form in Hung's name requesting Hung's military unit to allow him to return to the Foreign Trade University. Hung returned to university and continued his studies until May 1979.

After Hung had been back at university for a while, Trung graduated and was assigned to teach at Danang Foreign Trade College. Later he married his colleague Le Thanh Mai, a native of Hanoi.

I continued working at the Nghia Binh Import-Export Company for some time. When Mr. Nguyen Tan Anh was transferred to the post of director of the Nghia Binh Agricultural Specialty Products Company, the leadership appointed Mr. Le Thanh Ha as the new director of the Nghia Binh Import-Export Company, sent Mr. Nguyen Dinh Thi to be director of the Cau Doi Timber Company, and appointed Mr. Nguyen Thiep deputy director of the Nghia Binh Import-Export Company. I remained as head of the planning office and secretary of the company's party organization.

During the War Against America to Save the Nation, Mr. Ha and Mr. Thiep had both been political cadres in the war zone. They knew nothing about foreign trade, but came to work at our company through the good offices of the province party committee and the province people's council. The secretary of the province party committee and the chairman of the province people's council were at that time both natives of Quang Ngai Province.

In the middle of 1978, I was in Hanoi for a meeting and Comrade Ly Ban had a private talk with me.

He said: "Many of the Overseas Chinese in Hanoi have recently left for China. You told your son at the Foreign Trade University not to go with them. If he wants to go to China, please submit a request through the proper channels so that there can be no misunderstanding."

I sincerely thanked him for his concern for us, but added: "I guarantee that my son and I remain of one heart and mind. I promise you that my son will never desert."

"That is good," he replied, "but if the leadership allows you to go, well then, that is a different matter."

Chapter 35. The anti-China and anti-Chinese policy of the Vietnamese party and government

My time at the Nghia Binh Import-Export Company was also a time when the Vietnamese party and government were strongly promoting their anti-China and anti-Chinese policy. Overseas Chinese found themselves subjected to a social boycott. Although I was head of our company's planning office and secretary of its party organization, I was tightly bound with invisible chains.

At the beginning of 1978, the police in Qui Nhon City issued new identity cards for all residents. They sent people to each workplace to register and photograph employees. At the Nghia Binh Import-Export Company Kim Anh and I were the first to be registered and photographed, but we had to wait over a year for our new identity cards. As they had already taken away the old identity cards that we had brought with us from Hanoi, we were left without identity cards. In the situation prevailing at that time, it was risky to go anywhere without carrying an identity card.

On Sundays I would often go to Dap Da to visit my old mother. The fare by public transportation was only 0.50 dong with ID but 2 dong without. So I often asked the company to issue a special permit so that I could get the lower fare. At first they were glad to do it, but later they were no longer willing.

Kim Anh worked very hard and enthusiastically in her unit, successfully completing any task she was given. Every year she was awarded the title of "Advanced Worker." But throughout the time she worked there they never increased her wages. The head of her unit told her quite openly:

"You are a good worker. You successfully complete any task you undertake. We really should increase your wages, but unfortunately your husband is an Overseas Chinese so we can't do it."

What a miserable, mean-spirited fellow!

At that time Trung was a teacher at the Danang Foreign Trade College, but they did not let him teach a course in foreign trade. He was told to teach physical education instead. Hung was still studying at the Foreign Trade University. He was often followed by secret police agents.

At the same time as the Vietnamese party and government pursued their anti-China and anti-Chinese policy, they shamelessly continued to beg for Chinese aid.

On June 4, 1973, secretary of the party central committee Mr. Le Duan and prime minister Mr. Pham Van Dong headed a party and government delegation on

a visit to China. In their negotiations with prime minister Chou Enlai, they asked for aid but at the same time made demands and threats.

The Chinese side not only had to impose great sacrifices on their own people in order to aid Vietnam during the War Against America to Save the Nation, but also had to endure the complaints and reproaches of the Vietnamese side. At this meeting the Vietnamese delegation put forward all sorts of conditions. When it seemed that the two sides were about to reach agreement, they demanded that the Chinese side satisfy all their requests indefinitely. Anyone would have thought that they were fighting the Americans to save some other nation rather than their own.

In 1976 the Chinese people suffered the loss of several top leaders. Prime minister Zhou Enlai passed away, followed by chairman of the standing committee of the National People's Congress Marshal Zhu De and then Chairman Mao Zedong. On top of that, a big earthquake in Tangshan, Hebei Province caused heavy losses for the Chinese people. Most of Tangshan City was destroyed and tens of thousands of people were killed. It was a terrible tragedy!

The Vietnamese leaders, however, showed not even the slightest sympathy for the Chinese people, but only demanded yet more aid. In the middle of 1978, another big delegation, headed by Mr. Le Duan, went to Beijing to ask for more aid. It was really unreasonable! On this occasion, however, Mr. Hua Guofeng, the new party central committee secretary and prime minister, refused to provide further aid.

The Vietnamese leaders were very angry and openly expressed their resentment. After returning to Vietnam, they intensified the campaign against China and the Overseas Chinese. They circulated false rumors throughout the country, accused the Chinese party and government of every conceivable sin, and urged people to stand up and criticize China. What is more, they sent many propagandists to the countryside to incite hatred of China and defame the Overseas Chinese in the cruelest terms.

The hostility of the Vietnamese leaders to China and the Overseas Chinese is nothing new. It began long ago. In 1976, in an interview with a Swedish reporter, Mr. Hoang Tung, chief editor of the *People's Newspaper* and a member of the party central committee, said: "While Vietnam was at war, the Chinese and the Russians did their utmost to help Vietnam. That was very important for Vietnam. Now Vietnam is at peace and no longer needs to ask for aid."

Vietnam has close connections with the south of China. Its relations with its big neighbor had both positive and negative aspects. Vietnam had to resist political and cultural pressure from the north.

Good relations with Russia were very important for Vietnam. The Russians sought to minimize China's influence in the world. This goal was very much in

accord with Vietnam's interests. This was why more and more Vietnamese took sides with Russia.

The Vietnamese leaders continued to provoke China. Vietnamese troops often fired artillery shells across the border into China, damaged homes and schools, harassed people in the border area, and invaded Chinese land. Overseas Chinese living in the border area were forced to gather together and expelled from the country.

The situation deteriorated day by day until finally, on February 17, 1979, war broke out along the Vietnam—China border. The Vietnamese leaders broadcast threats to retaliate against all Overseas Chinese cadres, workers, and collective farmers. Plans were made to concentrate all Overseas Chinese in one place. It was announced that Overseas Chinese would be allowed to work only as bicycle repairers, barbers, rickshaw drivers, cart pullers, and unskilled laborers.

Use was also made of cunning methods like “give poison, then treat poison.” Some Overseas Chinese who did not understand the true situation were induced to criticize and openly insult China. Some people of that sort, being dependent on the authorities for their livelihood, agreed to stage plays or make radio or television broadcasts insulting China. This happened in Qui Nhon too.

One day Mr. To Lieu, director of the Nghia Binh television station, came to mobilize me. (He was from the Minh Huong people and a very distant relative of mine; his wife was an Overseas Chinese.) He asked me to speak on television and insult China. I should say that the Vietnamese party and government were not against China or the Overseas Chinese and that the Chinese leaders were wrong to claim otherwise.

“It is appropriate,” he continued, “for you to go on television and express your opinions, because you are entrusted with important work by the party and government. Your children are also well treated and allowed to study at university.”

“Unfortunately,” I replied, “my company just now is facing an emergency. I must prepare to go to Ly Son Island. I am very sorry, but I cannot do as you ask.”

He said no more. I did not want to be used against my will, so I found a way to avoid it.

The next day I was visited at home by Mr. Ton Nhon Tuan, an Overseas Chinese who had been a cadre of the Nghia Binh committee of the Fatherland Front since 1970.

“Mr. Quang,” he said, “the province leadership invite you to go on television tomorrow to express your opinions.”

“I am very sorry,” I replied, “but tomorrow morning I shall be leaving for Ly Son Island.”

“I can ask your company to postpone your trip.”

“That, I’m afraid, is impossible. The situation out there is very serious. Our company persuaded the farmers to grow garlic for export. Now it is harvesting time. If we don’t collect and buy the garlic from them very soon, they may explode with anger. The situation may lead to violence. I must go to Ly Son Island immediately. I cannot delay.”

Mr. Tuan said no more. He could not force me to do it. That was how I avoided that unpleasant job! I was really lucky!

However, quite a few Overseas Chinese did agree to appear on Qui Nhon television and “express their opinions.” Mr. Ton Nhon Tuan himself did so, as did Mr. Hoang Khac Thanh, a cadre of the Qui Nhon committee of the Fatherland Front, some retired Overseas Chinese cadres such as Mr. Ngo Khon Phuc, Mr. Ngo Khon Dao, Mr. Tran Tu Lap, and Mr. Ba, and some ordinary Overseas Chinese such as Mr. Ngo Khon Long.

Mr. Ton Nhon Tuan was very wicked and cunning – a real opportunist. Being a cadre of the province committee of the Fatherland Front, he was the first to insult China. He ranted and raved, and wept as though his father had just died. With tears flowing, nose running, and saliva dribbling, he made a truly pitiful and comic impression.

After appearing on television several days in a row to insult China, Mr. Tuan, together with his brothers Mr. Ton Nhon Hung and Mr. Ton Nhon Hiep, his sister Mrs. Ton Que Huong, and their families, left Vietnam for foreign countries.

Mr. Ngo Khon Dao was another opportunist. His son-in-law, Mr. Truong, was an Overseas Chinese. His son, Mr. Nam Sanh, had been sent by the Vietnamese government to study in Hungary and was now resident in Qui Nhon. As Mr. Dao wanted to please the Vietnamese leaders and win their trust, he was very active in this anti-China propaganda. On the day when he was scheduled to appear on television, he was sick and unable to walk properly. Nevertheless, he called a rickshaw to take him to the television station to express his anti-China opinions.

Mr. Tran Tu Lap was yet another opportunist. He stood up and talked about this and that in total confusion.

Mr. Ngo Khon Phuc was considered an honest man. He always agreed with people and confined himself to repeating commonplaces. He would say, for example:

“In any country where the revolution is victorious, all private companies are nationalized. That is a necessary thing to do. It was done not only in Vietnam, but also previously in China.”

Mr. Hoang Khac Thanh was shrewd and evasive. He expressed himself in bookish style:

“The Chinese leaders say that Vietnam is against China and the Overseas Chinese. History will decide who is right and who is wrong.”

Mr. Ngo Khon Long was an Overseas Chinese and an old friend of mine. He lived in Binh Dinh City. Before his television interview he came to my home and explained his situation to me:

“Mr. Quang, the leadership of An Nhon District told me to go on television to express my anti-China opinions. I am being forced to do it. Please understand me. It is not my wish.”

“If they told you to do it,” I replied, “you cannot refuse. Before you express an opinion, you must get their approval. Otherwise you will get into trouble.”

“My speech has already been written by the An Nhon District leadership. They said I should just read it aloud. Actually they wrote the speech for Mr. Kinh Quang, but he is too busy. So I am delivering it instead.”

A few days later, the Nghia Binh committee of the Fatherland Front convened a conference of all Overseas Chinese cadres in the province. Its purpose was to induce Overseas Chinese cadres to take a stand against China. We were told that the Vietnamese leadership had never been against China or the Overseas Chinese. Overseas Chinese were treated very well in Vietnam. There was no discrimination. The Chinese claims that Vietnam was against China and the Overseas Chinese were unjustified.

I too was invited to this conference. Many of those present read out what the Vietnamese leadership had told them to say. They said all sorts of things. I said nothing.

After the meeting I was approached by Mr. Hoang Khac Thanh. He said to me in confidence: “Mr. Quang, yesterday I spoke on television. Today several mayors told me that I lacked a clear standpoint. They were really angry!”

“Of course,” I replied. “They told you to say bad things about China, but you just mumbled. Of course they were not satisfied.”

Now Mr. Khac Thanh felt insecure. Friends of his had a boat and were leaving Vietnam. There was enough room in the boat for him and his family. He asked the local authorities for permission to leave and permission was granted. So they left.

The departure of Mr. Khac Thanh and his family opened the door for other Overseas Chinese cadres in Qui Nhon to follow suit. It also encouraged me to decide to request permission for our family to leave. It would be very good to escape from a difficult situation.

After the conference Mr. To Lieu came to my home. He asked me why I had not said anything.

“I have grievances,” I replied. “I myself have suffered discrimination. It would not have been good for me to express my views.”

Mr. To Lieu was very surprised to hear that.

“Why,” he asked, “what is the matter?”

“My wife and I have still not been given our new identity cards. The police have held on to them for over a year. If this is how they treat even people of our standing, then how do they treat others?”

I do not know what Mr. To Lieu said to the Qui Nhon police, but a few days later I received a letter from them. They said that the photographs on our old identity cards were unsuitable and asked us to come to the police station to have new photographs taken for our new cards. We did as they asked. After another few days we were summoned to the station to pick up our new cards. I saw that certain details on my card had been changed. The old card had said that I was born in Van Xuong, Hainan, China and was of Chinese nationality. The new card said that I was born in Nghia Binh, Vietnam and was of Vietnamese nationality. I realized that this was a dirty political trick for the purpose of assimilating me, but I pretended not to notice. I told myself that it would not benefit me and my family to complain.

A few days after the departure of Mr. Khac Thanh and his family, the Qui Nhon city council convened another conference for Overseas Chinese cadres. Among the people summoned to this conference were Mr. Ngo Khon Phuc, Mr. Ngo Khon Dao, Mr. Tran Tu Lap, Mr. Tu Khuong (a member of the party committee of Le Hong Phong District of Qui Nhon), Mr. Do Chi Quoc (principal of the Qui Nhon Elementary School), and myself.

Two days before the conference, and then again on the day before the conference, Mr. Tu Khuong went to see Mr. Khon Phuc and begged him not to worry or be afraid and not to leave Vietnam. “If anything should happen to you,” he promised, “I shall vouch for you.”

Also before the conference, Mr. Khon Phuc came to see me.

“Mr. Quang,” he said, “I always used to believe that the Vietnamese party and government treated us Overseas Chinese very well. But in the last two days they have caused me a lot of trouble. I am afraid! Now I see the truth. Everything they say is a lie. I’ve had enough. If they allow me, I too shall leave.”

“If you really do want to leave,” I replied, “it is easy enough. During this conference tell them that you and your wife are Overseas Chinese and want to leave. They will let you go right away.”

Indeed, that is exactly what he told them.

Mr. Khon Dao was still undecided. He still did not understand that the situation had now reached a very dangerous point. During the conference he

complained about how his children had been treated. His youngest daughter Xuan had worked hard and had many accomplishments to her credit but had still not been allowed to join the Communist Youth League. His second daughter Anh had also worked hard and achieved many successes but had still not been admitted to the Communist Party. I was sitting next to him and lightly knocked my leg against his several times to signal to him that it was no longer appropriate to raise such matters, but he ignored my nudging and continued to talk in the same vein.

Mr. Tran Tu Lap made a rambling criticism of Mr. Hoang Khac Thanh for leaving the country.

Mr. Do Chi Quoc said: “Maybe the comrades have made a mistake. I still work as a school principal. I am not retired yet. Why have I been summoned to a conference with retired people?”

The conference organizer replied: “It doesn’t matter whether you are retired or not.”

Mr. Tu Khuong said: “Although my ancestors were Chinese, three generations of my family, from my paternal grandfather to myself, have now grown up in Vietnam. We have become real Vietnamese.”

Then he took out a photograph of himself from the time of the French colonial regime. In the photograph he wore a yellow turban and a long gown. When the conference organizer saw it, he made a phony smile and remarked: “You have taken great care to preserve this photograph.”

As for myself, I kept silent.

The day after the conference, Mr. Tu Khuong hurried yet again to see Mr. Khon Phuc. “Heavens above!” he exclaimed. “Up to now I have always believed that the Vietnamese party and government treat the Overseas Chinese very well. I didn’t believe that they would cause trouble not only for other Overseas Chinese but even for me. Yesterday, after the conference, the district party committee held a meeting. They accused me of concealing my personal history and infiltrating the party. I was so frightened! I did not know what to say. I had to apply to withdraw from the party and my application was accepted.”

I felt sorry for Mr. Tu Khuong. It was only two days since he had promised Mr. Khon Phuc that if anything should happen to him he would vouch for him. Now, to his dismay, he could not vouch even for himself. All his life he had dedicated himself to the Vietnamese revolution. Now his life had lost all meaning.

A few days after the China—Vietnam border war broke out in February 1979, the Nghia Binh province party committee convened a conference for party officials at the district and province levels to communicate a draft resolution of the Central Committee against China and the Overseas Chinese.

Mr. Ton Nhon Hung and I attended this conference. We sat in the front row. The conference organizer was Mr. Vo Cong, secretary of the province party committee for routine matters and chairman of the Nghia Binh planning group. In introducing the Central Committee's draft resolution, Mr. Cong used the cruelest, dirtiest, and most merciless words. As I listened to his nonsense, I could not believe my ears. Involuntarily I grimaced. When he saw that, he immediately interjected: "This is not what I say. This is what the Central Committee says."

During the break Mr. Cong came up to us and said:

"I knew that among the cadres attending this conference there would be some Vietnamese of Chinese origin. I believe that those cadres also agree with the views of the Central Committee, because they joined the Vietnamese revolution, have contributed much to the Vietnamese revolution, and have great achievements to their credit."

Resuming the formal session, Mr. Cong proceeded to read out a secret document of the party central committee:

Concerning the international situation

Previously America was the No. 1 enemy of the Vietnamese people. Now the most dangerous and No. 1 enemy of the Vietnamese people is China.

Concerning the internal situation

Previously the No. 1 target was officials of the old puppet government and soldiers of the old puppet army who had committed crimes and owed a blood debt.

The No. 2 target was people of Catholic family origin.

This has now changed as follows:

The most dangerous and No. 1 target is Overseas Chinese cadres and party members working in government organizations (underlined twice in the original).

The No. 2 target is people of Catholic family origin.

The No. 3 target is officials of the old puppet government and soldiers of the old puppet army who have committed crimes and owe a blood debt.

From that time onward, I was not allowed to participate in party activity or in the work of my company, even though I was still head of the planning department and secretary of the company's party organization. I was just ignored.

Seeing the situation deteriorate from day to day, I was afraid that my personal problem might affect Kim Anh. So I told her to request permission to retire and that is what she did. A few days later, the company accepted her request and allowed her to retire.

The leadership of the Nghia Binh Import-Export Company tried by various means to get rid of me. One day, Director Le Thanh Ha told me:

"The Cong Trang Lumber Mill is currently in need of an experienced manager. We intend to send you to work there."

This mill was below the An Khe mountain pass and belonged to the Ministry of Forestry. I was very upset.

"You must be crazy," I told Mr. Ha. "The ministry assigned me to work in foreign trade, not manufacturing. Besides, the mill belongs to the Ministry of Forestry. It has nothing to do with our company. How did you get into such a muddle?"

Mr. Ha said no more.

A few days later, the company held a training session to acquaint senior managers with a top secret document. Although I was still secretary of the company's party organization, I was not invited to attend. I sought an explanation from other members of the party organization.

Mr. Dao Trong Mien told me: "You are middle management. Wait a few days and you will go to study with leading cadres at the province level." I knew that this was a lie.

Mr. Nguyen Nghe, a cadre subordinate to me, told me: "The company leaders have decided not to let you participate in any political activity. They are discussing sending you to a security zone."

That startled me. It made me realize just how serious the situation had become. The security zone was up in the mountains, in the jungle. It used to be a resistance base and was now used as a prison camp for officials of the old puppet government and soldiers of the old puppet army who had committed crimes and owed blood debts. The water there was poisonous. You could go but you would never return.

I worried night and day. I thought deeply, memorized many things, and tried to prepare my thoughts for whatever might happen.

At the beginning of March 1979, the China—Vietnam border war came to an end. China withdrew all its troops from Vietnam.

At the beginning of April, the people's council of Nghia Binh Province made known a new instruction from the leadership. It stated that China's southern oceanic fleet had withdrawn to Hainan Island in order to prepare to launch another offensive against Vietnam. The Chinese plan this time was to land 600,000 troops in Qui Nhon and along the coastal Highway 19. The people's council of Nghia Binh Province was instructed to evacuate Overseas Chinese, including Overseas Chinese cadres, from Qui Nhon by April 26, the further away from Qui Nhon and Highway 19 the better. The evacuees were to be concentrated in Mo Duc and Duc Pho districts of the old Quang Ngai Province.

One day Mr. Le Thanh Ha came to talk with me.

"The current situation is very serious. The whole province is making hurried preparations for war. For reasons of security, the people's council of the province has ordered the evacuation of some cadres to the security zone. Our company has decided to evacuate you to the security zone."

"I am just an ordinary cadre," I replied. "I dare not make any trouble for the party and government."

"This is an instruction from the leadership."

I did not want to go, but I realized that Mr. Ha was in a very difficult position. He knew that I had contributed a great deal to the Vietnamese revolution and that I had never done anything wrong or made any mistake. There was no evidence that I needed to be sent to the security zone. If I persisted in refusing to go, Mr. Ha would be unable to carry out the task assigned him by the leadership. That was a problem for him. I thought to myself: "If in this situation I persist in refusing, it will endanger me and my family."

I told Mr. Ha: "I know that you are all in a difficult position. Let me find my own means of solving the problem."

"How will you solve it?" asked Mr. Ha.

"I'll tell you tomorrow."

Chapter 36. I retire and prepare to leave the country

After talking with Mr. Ha, I went home and discussed the situation with Kim Anh. She agreed with my assessment. The next day I wrote a letter to the company leadership. In it I said that I had a serious stomach ailment and was unable to continue with my work. I requested to be allowed to retire. (I was then only 52 years old.)

When Mr. Ha read the letter, he was overjoyed. He looked as though he had just hit the jackpot. Right away he went to report to the people's council. The next morning the people's council issued an official decision for me to retire. The

company was instructed to arrange a month's convalescence for me. When I received my copy of the official decision, I was very happy and immediately began to make arrangements to hand over my position. Then I completed the handover procedure with the company leadership. Those minutes and hours marked the end of my decades-long political career. I returned to my home town as an ordinary resident no longer involved in politics.

I felt satisfied with my career. I had already achieved fame and success. I did not regret bringing it to an end. However, I did resent the fact that the Vietnamese government deprived Kim Anh and myself of our pensions. We got not even a single penny. What a dirty trick – a socialist government that wipes out the pensions of cadres who have loyally served it from the first day of the August Revolution to the complete reunification of the country!

Before retiring I tried to help several professionals in the company obtain opportunities for self-development. Thus I proposed that Mr. Nguyen Son be promoted to deputy manager of the Quang Ngai Import-Export Depot. I also sponsored Miss Nguyen Thi Thanh, a university graduate, for work at the planning office of the people's council of the province. Later she became deputy manager of the shipping supply office at Qui Nhon Port. I was glad for her.

I also helped the Qui Nhon city government obtain the money that was in the possession of the South Midlands Import-Export Company when it was closed down and that had been entrusted to the safekeeping of Mr. Dinh Trac.

When Mr. Dinh Trac heard that Kim Anh and I had retired, he was not happy with the way in which we had been treated by the leaders of the Nghia Binh Import-Export Company. He came to see me and said: "Mr. Le Thanh Ha has made a mistake. I must ask the people's council not to allow you to retire. Your departure will be a big loss to the company."

That alarmed me considerably, because if the people's council listened to him and did not allow me to retire then I would again find myself in a dangerous position. I told him that the decision had already been made and I did not want to have it changed and make trouble for the organization. As a result, Mr. Trac abandoned his plan to intervene.

When Mr. Ton Nhon Hung heard that I had retired, he too came to talk to me.

"Mr. Quang, why did you ask to retire? You will lose a lot."

"In the current situation," I replied, "it is better to retire than to stay at work."

"Why is that?"

"I have retired and in a few days' time you too will ask to retire."

"But I have not reached retirement age. I'll never ask to retire before then."

"We'll see."

Indeed, two weeks after I retired, Mr. Nhon Hung also asked to retire and go overseas. That is how history messes about with people's lives.

At this time Ai Nga and her husband also asked to quit their jobs and leave the country with all their relatives.

The campaign of the Vietnamese party and government against China and the Overseas Chinese spread throughout the country. In order to protect the lives and property of Overseas Chinese, the Chinese government requested permission to send a ship to Vietnam to bring Overseas Chinese home to China. The Vietnamese government refused permission. China sent the ship anyway, but the Vietnamese authorities found a hundred ways and a thousand tricks to prevent it from accomplishing its mission.

The leadership of Nghia Binh Province initially agreed to allow the Chinese ship to dock at Qui Nhon Port and take Overseas Chinese on board. When the ship arrived in the harbor, however, the captain was told to go back to international waters and wait there. At the same time, the province leadership sent many cadres to talk to the Overseas Chinese. They were urged not to return to China, but they were also told that if they insisted on returning to China then they should do so through the Orderly Departure Program for Overseas Chinese. That meant that they should first assemble in the transit camp that the provincial authorities had set up somewhere in Tuy Phuoc District, about ten kilometers from Qui Nhon.

When the Overseas Chinese heard about the transit camp, they took fright. No one dared talk any more about returning to China.

The Chinese ship waited outside the harbor for a long time and was still not allowed to dock. Unable to accomplish its mission, the ship returned to China.

As soon as the Chinese ship had left, the province leadership again sent its cadres to talk to the Overseas Chinese, especially the wealthy people among them, and urge them to go to Qui Nhon to follow the procedure for emigration.

In the middle of 1978, the Vietnamese party and government instructed the party committee, people's council, and police of Nghia Binh Province to campaign for and organize the large-scale emigration of Overseas Chinese. First, they allowed wealthy Overseas Chinese, as representatives of their community, to raise money to buy boats and allocate space on the boats to Overseas Chinese who lived in the province or came to Qui Nhon from Saigon, Danang, and other places in order to go overseas. The Nghia Binh province police and Qui Nhon city police established a "Departures Office" to make the emigration procedure for Overseas Chinese easy and legal.

The fare for a place on a boat was 6 taels of gold per person for residents of the province and 26 taels per person for people from outside the province. In addition, each person had to pay 5 taels of gold to the province finance department

as so-called “duty money.” The boat owners also had to pay part of the gold they had collected as bribes to the province and city police and other authorities. Finally, the local authorities made departing Overseas Chinese sign papers donating their properties together with their contents to the Vietnamese government.

The Vietnamese authorities collected tens of thousands of taels of gold as “duty money” from Overseas Chinese as they left the country, not including gold extorted from boat owners.

During the period when the Vietnamese party and government were conducting their anti-China and anti-Chinese policy and encouraging Overseas Chinese to emigrate, up to the end of 1979, tens of thousands of Overseas Chinese departed from Qui Nhon Port on hundreds of boats. Ten boatloads left in one night alone. Two boats sank while still in Vietnamese territorial waters. About 500 people drowned. So much sorrow!

The Vietnamese authorities dealt with departing Overseas Chinese in mean, dirty, and cruel ways. Cadres sent out by local authorities tried to deter Vietnamese from buying the possessions of people about to leave the country. They were warned that anyone who did so would be charged, taken to court, and fined. The purpose of these threats was to ensure that emigrants would be unable to sell their property and would therefore have to leave it for the government. The Vietnamese, however, were not stupid. Things were going cheap, they had money, so why not buy them?

Before an Overseas Chinese family left their house on the day of departure, the local authorities would send a squad of armed police to wait outside. As soon as the family had emerged from the house, the police commander would order his men forward. They would noisily rush to surround the house, like buzzing bees guarding a damaged hive, and seal up the house with papers prepared in advance. It was absurd. Did a socialist government really have to act in such a ridiculous fashion?

Some local cadres took the opportunity to extort money. They invented reasons to force departing Overseas Chinese to pay additional charges. The victims knew very well that the reasons were nonsense, but they dared not object. They had to cough up. What else could they do?

From April 1979 onward, in the context of preparing for war, it was an urgent priority of the leadership to secure the departure of Overseas Chinese cadres. Overseas Chinese cadres from inside the province were to leave first. Overseas Chinese cadres from outside the province were no longer allowed to leave the country from Qui Nhon.

For us Nghia Binh Overseas Chinese cadres this policy was a chance that comes once in a thousand years. We were really happy!

During this period the leaders of Nghia Binh Province and Qui Nhon City were playing a tricky game. Some Overseas Chinese cadres, such as Mr. Ngo Khon Dao, Mr. Ngo Khon Phuc, Mr. Tran Tu Lap, and Mr. Anh Ba, were told to retire. Others were told to stay and continue working in Vietnam. Officially, Overseas Chinese cadres were not allowed to leave the country.

This two-faced policy greatly perplexed and angered Overseas Chinese cadres. They did not understand what sort of game the Vietnamese leaders were playing. They would come to talk with me.

“Mr. Quang,” they would say, “the party and government told us to urge Overseas Chinese to stay in Vietnam and live in peace. They told us to inform Overseas Chinese that they are not allowed to leave the country. But in fact they are allowing masses of Overseas Chinese to leave. When we talk to ordinary Overseas Chinese, they scold and curse us. They accuse us of always telling lies and trying to trick them. We are really angry and fed up!”

I would reply jokingly: “They trick you because you are so hardworking.”

They truly exemplified the motto: “Say all the good things, do all the bad things.”

At this time the Vietnamese party and government also ramped up their campaign against China and the Overseas Chinese. They mobilized hordes of cadres to go everywhere and stoke up popular hatred of China and the Overseas Chinese. They installed loudspeakers to broadcast anti-China propaganda. Many appeared in Quang Trung Park in front of our house, so we were subjected to constant insult day and night. Perhaps the loudspeakers were placed there deliberately for our benefit. It was a real headache.

These conditions deeply distressed Ai Hoa. She told me and her mother: “The situation has become extremely serious. It is a matter of life and death for our family. Please try hard to think of a way to obtain permission for us to move to another place, so that we don’t have to endure any more suffering and hardship.”

It was heart-wrenching to hear Ai Hoa talk like that. We realized that she was right. I began secretly to prepare my thoughts about how best to obtain permission for us to leave the country. But after carefully considering all the possibilities I could see that there were many difficulties. The problem was not easy to solve. So I did not yet make a definite decision.

My son-in-law Hoa, who happened to be visiting us from Dap Da at the time, told us: “Most Overseas Chinese are leaving the country. You must think up some way to save your children from this suffering and hardship.”

“There are a lot of difficulties,” I replied. “And I don’t have enough money to buy places in a boat.”

“I have money. If it is not enough, I might be able to borrow some more from my sister-in-law, Mrs. Hai Quynh.”

Then I received a visit from two of my former colleagues from the Nghia Binh Import-Export Company – Mr. Nguyen Hieu, secretary of the trade union, and Mrs. Nguyen Thi Lien, a native of Dap Da.

“Mr. Quang,” they said, “all the Overseas Chinese in Qui Nhon are leaving the country. Do you too intend to go?”

“No,” I replied, “I haven’t given it any thought. Our hearts are still loyal to Vietnam. I don’t want to follow them. But if the leadership want us to leave, then we shall comply with their wishes.”

“The leadership will not consent to your leaving.”

“Right. It won’t happen.”

“How then do you view the situation? What is your impression of relations between the two parties and governments – of China and Vietnam?”

“All I know is that when parents argue it is the children who suffer.”

They were satisfied. It seemed to them that I had decided to remain in Vietnam. Later we learned that they had received an assignment from the organization to investigate us.

After that, another two cadres from the company, Mr. Duong and Mr. Mai, came for a private talk.

“Mr. Quang,” they told me, “the Overseas Chinese in Qui Nhon are all leaving the country. Do you too want to leave? If you have any problem and need help, then we are here to help you.”

I was afraid that they too might have come to investigate me. I dared not answer them directly.

“I have no such intention,” I said.

After they left I thought to myself: “Mr. Duong is an old friend and comrade. We have worked together since our time at the General Import-Export Company in Hanoi. I can trust him. Mr. Mai is a new colleague. Although I have not known him long, I am sure that he has no reason to betray me.”

I relaxed. Later I spoke again with Mr. Duong. This time I was more open.

“I too want to leave the country, but the paperwork is a problem. I would like you to introduce me to Mr. Ho, the police chief of Qui Nhon City, so that he can help me.”

I knew that Mr. Duong and Mr. Ho were from the same native place.

Mr. Duong gladly agreed. I promised him that if I succeeded I would give him a bicycle.

For our family leaving the country was no simple matter. We had to think very carefully, because I was a party member and a leading company cadre. I had been abroad with party and government delegations. I knew many party and government secrets. If I made any trouble I would attract attention from the secret police. Any negligence on my part would endanger not only myself but also my

family. I had seen what terrible things could happen to people. If the leadership found something wrong with you, they could easily send you to meet Chairman Ho.

Night and day I weighed the pros and cons, searching for the safest way to solve the problem. Finally I concluded that I should appeal to the sympathy and goodwill of the province leaders. If they agreed to allow us to leave the country, then everything would work out fine. Even if they did not allow us to leave, at least they would not arrest or otherwise harm us.

For trying to leave the country illegally the lightest punishment – so people said – was dismissal from your job, leaving your whole family to starve. You could even be arrested and imprisoned on a charge of treason to the party and people. That, in fact, was the normal outcome.

So off I went to visit Mr. Nguyen Hoang, secretary of the party committee of Nghia Binh Province. When I arrived at his door I hesitated. I did not simply walk right in, but opened the door slightly and peeped in. He and I had once been friends and comrades, but now that people were hostile to me as an Overseas Chinese I could not just walk into a leader's private residence.

While I was hesitating, I had the good luck to be noticed by an old friend who lived in the same building as Mr. Hoang. He greeted me and asked me what the matter was. I told him that I wanted to meet Mr. Hoang and he took me in to see him.

Mr. Hoang was kind, straightforward, and affable. I had known him for a very long time. Every Monday he used to hold a meeting with leading company cadres. I had often attended these meetings. We had a good rapport. He invited me to sit down and have tea, we exchanged greetings, and then he calmly asked what he could do for me. I explained our family circumstances and told him frankly and clearly why I had come to see him.

Despite the noisy public campaign against China and the Overseas Chinese, I still had excellent relations with many of the province's leading officials. They were very sympathetic. Of course, as party secretary of the province Mr. Hoang had to express the official position of the Vietnamese party and government regarding Overseas Chinese cadres. He said:

“The policy of the party and government regarding Overseas Chinese cadres remains the same as before. We have always trusted you. Nothing has changed in that respect. We have no reason to single you out or treat you differently. You have no cause for worry. You can keep your positions and salaries and continue working as before. If you feel able to continue, the party and government are very content that you should do so. But if you do not want to continue the party and government will not force you.”

I understood this last statement as a signal that we would be allowed to leave the country. I saw that there was a way out. I felt happy inside.

Mr. Hoang continued in a sad tone of voice:

“We know very well that you have made a contribution to the Vietnamese revolution and behaved well. We shall never forget it. Now there has been an unfortunate development in the objective situation. That is a painful fact. We did not foresee it. If now you want to leave the country and work abroad, then make your preparations and go. As for other matters, you do not need to know. History will judge.”

I was deeply moved and could not hold back my tears. I was unable to speak except to thank him sincerely for his sympathy and concern.

“So where do you want to go?” he asked.

“I don’t really know.” Then, in order to assure him that I would not help Vietnam’s enemies, I added: “But I certainly don’t want to go either to China or to America. I’ll sit on the boat and wherever it drifts that is where I’ll go.”

He nodded in approval.

“When you return home, pay attention to the news. When you hear that the authorities in Hong Kong are admitting boat people and that our government is allowing them to leave the country, you may start the journey. If you have any gold, then take it with you. You may need it in your new country. Without money it will be very difficult for you. We shall do what we can to make it easy for you. Have a safe journey. Bon voyage! That is all.”

He was choking with tears and held my hand tight for a long time. I too was very moved and could not hold back my tears. I sincerely thanked him and went home.

I shall always remember Mr. Hoang for his help and concern. In 1992 I returned to Vietnam to visit my mother and relatives. I would have liked to visit him too, but unfortunately he had already passed away. To my deep regret, I never saw him again. Mr. Hoang has gone forever, but his name and image will never fade from my mind.

Having surmounted this hurdle, I boldly proceeded to the next step. I went off in search of the local Departures Office. This office belonged to a “secret” organization. Outsiders did not know where it was. However, I had obtained a letter of introduction from a related office and knew where to find them. The Ministry of Police had set up the departures offices, staffed with officers from province and city police departments, to implement the departure procedure.

I happened to arrive during the officers’ lunch break. They were eating in the cafeteria. As the matter was urgent, I went straight into the cafeteria. I was chased out and not allowed to go back in. I went home disappointed.

I returned to the Departures Office in the afternoon and asked to register for our departure. Two police officers were on duty there. One was from the Ministry of Police. His name was Duong. He was a native of Nghe An Province and spoke with an accent. He was white and fat, his face was puffy, and his tummy was round. Perhaps he had a long straw and had sucked up a lot of “big fat ingredient.” The other was a local police officer named Gan. He was dark-skinned and thin. Perhaps he had not yet sucked up any “big fat ingredient.”

I explained why we wanted to leave the country. Mr. Duong immediately scolded me. With a raised voice he told me: “The party and government do not allow Overseas Chinese cadres to leave the country. Go home!”

“I retired long ago,” I replied. “I am no longer a cadre. I am just an ordinary Overseas Chinese resident. You should allow me to register.”

Mr. Duong then allowed me to register.

“How many are you?” he asked.

“Fourteen.” I was including the families of our married children.

Mr. Duong was surprised.

“You have a lot of people, don’t you?”

“Yes, old and young, males and females, we are fourteen in all.”

Mr. Duong smirked and wrote down each person’s name in his notebook.

I had surmounted another hurdle. I was very happy.

Next I went to look for a boat owner in order to reserve places. Alas! Many boat owners knew that I was a cadre who had gone to the North and returned. They knew that I was poor and did not have enough money to pay their fares. I saw that they did not want to do business with me. I was very disappointed!

A short time later the leadership announced a new policy. Henceforth only Overseas Chinese from Nghia Binh Province would be allowed to leave the country from Qui Nhon. Overseas Chinese from outside the province would no longer be allowed to do so. Even outsiders who had already registered would not be allowed to go. Their money was returned to them. Many additional places thereby suddenly became available. For us it seemed to be a chance that comes once in a thousand years! We were really happy.

Again I went out to look for boat owners, but despite the new policy they still did not want us. With the collusion of local officials and police, they continued to give preference to outsiders, because outsiders paid 26 taels of gold per person while local people paid only 6 taels.

One boat owner named Mrs. Hop Y was an old friend of mine. Out of regard for our friendship she accepted us, albeit reluctantly and on condition that I would pay 6 taels of gold for each place on her boat.

At that time another old friend named Mr. Diep Nang Tin was urging me to leave the country. He took me to meet a boat owner named Mr. Diep Nang Trang. This man was quite honest. He said that I could pay him 3 taels of gold for each adult and one and a half taels for each child. I told him that I would give him my answer in a few days. Then I found another boat owner named Mr. Diep Tuong. He had previously lived in Dap Da District and was an old student of mine. Mr. Tuong said that he would charge me two and a half taels of gold for each adult and one tael for each child.

After meeting with several boat owners, I returned home, calculated total costs, and found that I still did not have enough money. I went to see Mr. Diep Nang Trang. I told him frankly that I was a cadre and did not have much money and asked him to reduce his charges a little.

“The charges are fair,” he replied. “You can pay me part now and the rest when you arrive in Hong Kong or settle in a new country.”

I felt reassured.

Mr. Diep Nang Tin heard that I did not have enough money. On his own initiative he said that he might ask Mr. Duong Quang Ngoc to lend me some money. I was very glad to hear that and thanked him, but for a long time I heard nothing more from him. Later I learned that he had left the country with his family without telling me. I did not blame him, because that was the objective reality.

I also had a good friend named Mr. Au Bang Binh in Dap Da. Knowing that I was short of money, Mr. Binh spontaneously offered to lend me some money. I was glad to hear it and thanked him.

“How much?” I asked.

“No problem,” he replied. “I can lend you any sum from 5 taels of gold up to 25 taels.”

I was struck dumb.

I came home and thought things over. I realized that I was in a fix. I had recently returned from Hanoi after an absence of over twenty years. My friends did not understand me. Who would dare place so much trust in me as to lend me such a large sum of money? Moreover, I had rarely borrowed money – only in special circumstances. Even now I dared not open my mouth to ask anyone for a loan. So I put aside any thought of borrowing. And for a long time I saw no more of Mr. Au Bang Binh.

At that time Mr. Dong Loi was doing the paperwork for leaving the country. He prepared some herbal medicine for me as a gift, so that I could sell it and make some money. He also gave me a French bicycle. Later he heard that I wanted to leave the country but was short of money, so instead of the herbal medicine he gave me half a tael of gold. Mr. Thanh Quang also gave me half a tael of gold.

I told my sister Hanh the truth:

“You gave me money to buy a house. I have not yet bought a house, and now I am going to leave the country with my family. I would like to use this money to pay our boat fares. Is that OK with you?”

Sister Hanh gave her consent. Her husband also gave me a tael of gold. When we departed we left them all the contents of our home, which were worth about the same as the money and gold they had given me – two French bicycles, a Vietnamese bicycle, a new sewing machine, a new iron bed, a new electric rice cooker, a refrigerator, an electric fan, a radio, and all our other belongings. Later I also gave Sister Hanh my house in Dap Da. We shall always remember the relatives and friends who helped us.

I now had almost enough money. I immediately went to find Mr. Mai and asked him to help me meet Mr. Binh, the police chief of Nghia Binh Province. I did not tell him the reason for my request, but I promised that if he did as I asked I would give him a French Peugeot bicycle. Mr. Mai was happy to hear that.

“Whenever you need me, I am ready to help,” he said.

From then on Mr. Mai came to see me now and then to check out the situation.

Still feeling insecure, I went to see Mr. Diep Nang Trang again and asked him to reduce his charges a little. He replied in the same way as before:

“Give me now however much you have. You can pay me the rest later.”

I had with me 15 taels of gold. I was going to give it all to Mr. Trang and find a way to pay him the rest when I arrived in Hong Kong. Mr. Trang took me to see the boat. He was organizing two boats. He owned one of those boats, but that boat was already fully booked. The second boat was owned by Mr. Thai Khai Du. It was under repair. When the repairs were completed, the two boats would set off together. Mr. Trang showed me the second boat.

“You can all go on Mr. Du’s boat,” he said.

We were standing on the dock. I looked down and spotted Mr. Du standing on the boat and giving instructions to the workers doing the repairs. I was startled to recognize him. Surely it could not be!

In 1949 Mr. Du had been leader of the Tam Thanh Group within the structure of the Qui Nhon Kuomintang, while I was leader of the “progressive democratic” movement among the local Overseas Chinese. Later, after the defeat of the Tam Thanh Group, Mr. Du and his group had joined the progressive democratic movement as members of the South Midlands Overseas Chinese Youth Militia organized by the United Association of Overseas Chinese. After the end of the Anti-French Resistance War we had gone to the North, but Mr. Du had remained in the South and resumed his old activities with the Tam Thanh Group, stopping only when the South was liberated. So our political positions were

directly opposed. Now we were going to leave on Mr. Du's boat. This was not a good idea.

After taking a look at the boat, I told Mr. Trang: "Wait for me to check my money. I'll give you my answer when I return."

I never saw Mr. Trang again.

Next I asked a friend to take me to find Mr. Quach Quang Anh, owner of the ship *Nghe Quang*.

"Yes, yes," he said – and promptly disappeared.

So I went to see Mr. Quach Quang Anh on my own. As soon as I reached his front door and asked to see him, his relatives stopped me and would not let me in.

"Mr. Quach Quang Anh is not at home," they said. "He is not receiving guests."

I had to go home.

Then the central leadership suddenly changed their policy. Concluding that China was not going to launch an attack against Qui Nhon after all, they prohibited Overseas Chinese from leaving the country. No vessels would be allowed to depart. Seven boats waiting to leave from Nghia Binh Province, including the boats belonging to Mr. Trang and Mr. Du, were stuck – or so it appeared.

However, the police officers in the Qui Nhon Departures Office, greedy for bribes, were not yet implementing the new instructions from the center. Then the central government summoned Mr. Nghia, chairman of the people's council of Nghia Binh Province, to Hanoi for consultations. Before setting off, Mr. Nghia instructed the province and city police departments to permit the prompt departure of all boats that were already prepared to leave. Unfortunately, the officials in the province finance department wanted to extort more "duty gold," so they kept on delaying the boats' departure. When Mr. Nghia returned from Hanoi and saw that the boats had still not left, he was very angry and ordered their immediate departure.

When I heard this news, I was thunderstruck. Panic and confusion overwhelmed me. For half a day I ran around looking for Mr. Mai. Then he showed up at my home.

"Mr. Quang," he told me, "all but one of the boats have now left. Why don't you complete the procedures to leave the country? You have to do it right away. Otherwise you won't be able to leave."

In a panic, I asked Mr. Mai to take me to see Mr. Binh, the police chief of the province, and seek his help. It was already about five in the afternoon and people were just leaving work. Mr. Mai and I sat across the road from Mr. Binh's house, waiting for him to appear. When we saw him, Mr. Mai told me to follow him into the house. He introduced me to Mr. Binh and then went outside.

Mr. Binh invited me to sit down and have some tea. Mr. Binh and I were old acquaintances. We had seen one another every Monday at the party meeting. Now the situation had changed. I no longer had the same status. That is why I dared not simply show up at his house on my own.

“What is the matter?” asked Mr. Binh.

“I want to leave the country with my family, but as I cannot pay the fares no boat owner wants to meet me. I don’t know what to do, so I have come to you for help. Please introduce me to a boat owner so that I can negotiate the fares.”

Mr. Binh pretended not to understand.

“But you are Vietnamese,” he said. “You are not allowed to leave the country. Remember how every Monday we used to attend the party meeting together. Now you say you are Chinese. Do you have any documents to prove it?”

“I have. Please allow me to go home and fetch them.”

I hurried home. First I examined my identity card. I saw to my dismay that it gave my nationality as Kinh (Vietnamese). I was very confused. I was shaking and sweating all over.

“That’s it,” I thought to myself. “I have failed.”

But then I thought of something else. I looked for and found our children’s birth certificates. I was overjoyed to see that they indicated my nationality as Han (Chinese). I brought them to show to Mr. Binh. He looked at the certificates and smiled.

“What is your request?” he asked. “Which boat do you want to board?”

“The *Nghe Quang*.”

“How many people?”

“Fourteen altogether.”

He immediately wrote me a letter of introduction:

The family of Mr. Han Hing Quang, Chinese, fourteen people in all, wish to board the *Nghe Quang* in order to leave the country. I request the owner of the *Nghe Quang* to reserve places for Mr. Quang’s family.

Mr. Binh handed me the letter and added: “This is only my opinion. You will have to go to the Qui Nhon District Police Headquarters as well.”

I sincerely thanked him and returned home. I had surmounted another hurdle.

The letter of introduction in hand, I went to find Mr. Duong and ask him to take me to see Mr. Ho, police chief at the Qui Nhon District Police Headquarters. Mr. Duong, however, was out. Only his wife was at home. I told her why I had come. She led me toward the police headquarters. At a certain spot she stopped,

pointed her finger at a building about 100 meters away, and said: “That building over there is the Qui Nhon District Police Headquarters.” Then she disappeared.

I was lucky. Heaven must have taken pity on me. When I reached the building, I saw two police guards holding guns and standing before the gate. They said nothing and let me pass. Had I been asked for papers I might not have been allowed in, because at that time there were tight checks on people entering and leaving all government buildings. Confidently I walked in and looked for Mr. Ho’s office (we had not met before). I was not asked to wait. I just walked right into his office, explained why I had come, and handed him Mr. Binh’s letter of introduction. He looked at it.

“Do you need to request anything in particular?” he asked.

I asked him to introduce our family of fourteen people to the owner of the *Nghe Quang* so that we could leave the country. He picked up a pen and wrote the following on a sheet of paper:

To Mr. Quach Quang Anh, owner of the *Nghe Quang*

I would like to introduce Mr. Han Hing Quang and his family of fourteen people, who wish to board your boat in order to leave the country. I request you to reserve places for Mr. Quang’s family and ensure that the matter is resolved smoothly.

He handed me the letter and said: “This shows our support, but you must still go to the Departures Office to complete the specific procedure.”

I was very happy and thanked him for his help. I had surmounted another hurdle.

I brought the letters of introduction to the Departures Office, where the same two police officers were on duty as on my previous visit. Mr. Duong received me. I explained why I was there:

“The province and district police chiefs have written these letters to introduce me. I am now reporting to you and requesting your help in completing the procedure for our departure.”

I handed him the letters. He looked at them but he showed displeasure. Perhaps he wanted some money.

“I don’t know who these people are. I only know that the leadership are not allowing any Overseas Chinese cadres to leave the country.”

He went away and left me standing on my own. I was embarrassed and panic-stricken. I broke out in a cold sweat. I had no idea what to do.

“Everything I do ends in failure,” I thought to myself.

Fortunately, the other police officer, Mr. Gan, came up and stood beside me. He had seen what happened.

“Don’t worry,” he told me. “Just ignore him and let me solve your problem.” He took a pen and wrote and signed the following under Mr. Ho’s letter:

Pass to Mr. Quach Quang Anh, owner of the *Nghe Quang*, for implementation.

Overjoyed, I sincerely thanked Mr. Gan, said goodbye, and went home. I was still shaking as I left the Departures Office. But with help from Mr. Gan I had surmounted another hurdle.

Next I took all my papers and went to see Mr. Quach Quang Anh, owner of the *Nghe Quang*. Again his relatives stopped me at the door.

“Not receiving guests!” was all they said.

Not knowing what to do, I returned home. At that time our son-in-law Hoa was visiting us from Dap Da. I gave him a detailed account of the situation.

“My whole family are leaving on the *Nghe Quang*,” he said. “I know Mr. Quach Quang Anh. I can take you to see him.”

So that very evening Hoa took me to Mr. Quach Quang Anh’s house and spoke with his mother.

“Mr. Quach Quang Anh is not at home,” she said.

“We have come from province police headquarters to see Mr. Quach Quang Anh.”

“Well,” she replied, “please come back tomorrow morning at seven.”

In the morning we went there again. When we reached the door, Hoa went off and left me on my own. Mr. Anh was upstairs, but did not come down. Instead he sent a relative down to deal with me.

“I’m afraid we are busy at the moment. We are not receiving guests.”

“I am here on the instructions of the province police.”

Hearing that, Mr. Anh sent his assistant down to see me – Mr. Vuong Hong Cam.

Mr. Cam apologized and said gently: “We really are busy at the moment. You are welcome to come back at two o’clock this afternoon.”

I returned at exactly two. The relative came down.

“They are busy at the moment. They are not receiving guests.”

This time I got really angry.

“From now on,” I thought to myself, “I’m not going to be so polite any more. Otherwise I shall get nowhere. Time is running out.”

“You invited me to come at two,” I reminded them sternly. “Here I am, right on the dot. I won’t accept any more excuses. Are you willing to meet me or not? Tell me the truth!”

Hearing my voice from upstairs, Mr. Anh immediately sent Mr. Cam down to see me and apologize. I handed him the letters of introduction. He read them.

“OK,” he said nervously, “don’t worry. We’ll register you and your family at once. Go back home and get ready to leave.”

“Do you have everything you need?” I asked.

“Yes, we don’t need anything else.”

“Are you absolutely sure?”

“Yes, absolutely.”

Then Mr. Cam informed me that the boat would leave on June 1, which was about ten days from then.

The official procedure for departure could now be regarded as having been completed. However, I faced another very difficult task. Our family was scattered over the whole country. Travel between North and South required a special permit. Unofficial communication by mail, telephone, and telegram was blocked by the government. Kim Anh and Thang were with me at Qui Nhon, but Ai Hoa was on temporary assignment in Saigon, Trung and Mai were in Danang, Manh was with my mother in Dap Da, Hung was at the Foreign Trade University in Hanoi, and Cuong was on a course work assignment collecting and buying coffee at Dac Lac.

I sent Hung many telegrams asking him to request leave to visit his family. I also sent a telegram to the Foreign Trade University, asking them to allow Hung to visit his family. But there was no response. We were very anxious and did not know what to do.

When Cuong returned from Dac Lac, we explained the situation to him and told him to go to his college in Danang and request withdrawal from his course of study. We also told him to explain the situation to Trung and Mai, who were teaching at the same college, and ask them to come home at once. Trung and Mai, however, did not want to leave the country. Then we sent Manh to Danang to ask them to come home, but the result was the same. Their attitude caused us great anxiety. We were unable to eat or sleep well. We were like ants crawling inside a hot frying pan. I sent Trung a telegram, but he did not receive it. Then I went to the Qui Nhon post office to telephone him, but I was not allowed to use one of their telephones. They told me to go to my company to make a call, even though the company had never permitted employees to use its telephones for personal calls. I asked the company to issue me a travel permit so that I could go to Danang, only to be told that I had already retired and they were no longer responsible for me.

I could not solve any of these problems. It was like playing ping pong. A real headache! I did not know what to do. I was confused, angry, and upset.

In the midst of this confusion Ai Hoa got back from Saigon. As soon as she stepped into the house and put down her rucksack, I brought her up to date on the situation. She was very concerned about Hung.

“I’ll find a way to bring Hung home, come what may,” she declared.

It was already six or seven o’clock in the evening. Ai Hoa wolfed down her dinner, then she hurried to find Mrs. Thanh, an aunt of Hung’s fiancée Chung who worked at the Qui Nhon railway station. Ai Hoa asked Mrs. Thanh to accompany her to the Dieu Tri railway station on the main north-south line to buy a ticket to Hanoi.

When Ai Hoa tried to buy the ticket, the ticket clerk said: “You are an Overseas Chinese. I cannot sell it to you.”

Mrs. Thanh intervened: “Ai Hoa is a cadre and urgently needs to go to Hanoi on a work assignment. She has an official permit for urgent travel. Whether she is an Overseas Chinese or not, you are obliged to sell her a ticket.”

The ticket clerk issued the ticket.

When Ai Hoa reached our old house in Hanoi, she found Chung living there. Chung told her that Hung’s university had sent him to a mountainous area in Hoa Binh Province to perform productive labor. The authorities did not want Overseas Chinese to remain in Hanoi.

Together with Hung’s friend and classmate Mr. Nhan, Ai Hoa bicycled to Hoa Binh Province. By the time they reached the area it was very late at night. They found Hung, explained the situation to him, and brought him back to Hanoi. They had only just stepped into the house when an official from the Foreign Trade University – actually a spy – turned up.

Seeing Hung, he asked: “So Hung is home?”

“Yes,” replied Hung, “I just came home.”

The next day Ai Hoa asked a friend to accompany her to the airport to buy a plane ticket, so that she could return south first and reassure us that Hung was on his way. At the airport, however, she was told that she could not travel by air as she was an Overseas Chinese. She insisted, but they would not let her board the plane. She did not know what to do. She could only cry and go back. It was truly pitiful.

Meanwhile, Hung had asked Chung’s father Mr. Khiem, who was a train driver, to buy him a train ticket, but he could not do it. When Ai Hoa returned from the airport, she and Hung went to the railway station to buy tickets. At first the young ticket clerk told them that there were no tickets left. But Heaven took pity on them. It was a very hot summer day and the ticket clerk was half asleep.

“No,” he corrected himself, “I still have one ticket left. You can have it.”

Ai Hoa was very happy to hear that. She thanked him. But the two of them still had only one ticket between them. Hung went with his friend to the back of the

railway station, waited for the train to start moving, and jumped on. Now at least they were both on the train. However, there was at that time strict inspection of passengers' tickets. Anyone found to be without a ticket was taken off the train at the next station.

Fortunately, sitting next to Ai Hoa on the train was a woman worker, a native of Quang Ngai, taking her small son to her husband's home. She had two tickets (her work unit would reimburse her). Ai Hoa quietly spoke to her:

"Please let me borrow one of your tickets. When it is time for you to get off the train, I'll give it back to you."

As she said this, she handed the woman a generous sum of money. The woman was very glad to oblige. Now Hung had a ticket. Sister and brother felt at peace. Whenever the conductor came around to check tickets, Hung put the boy on his lap. The journey went smoothly. When the train arrived at Quang Ngai Station, the woman got off and Hung got off with her, carrying her son in his arms to the gate. Then he boarded a minibus to Qui Nhon.

I was worried that Hung's university might call the police and cause problems for us. So I immediately sent a telegram to the Foreign Trade University, informing them that Hung had come home because his parents were gravely ill and requesting that they grant him two months' leave. Perhaps the university knew our secret, but they did not do anything about it.

Now Hung was home, but Trung and Mai had not come. We were very worried about them, but did not know what to do. We could only quietly cry.

Mr. Quach Quang Anh kept on sending people to ask me for various documents – a certificate of exemption from "gold duty," a declaration from the leadership of my company that I had completed the handover of my position, a declaration that I had withdrawn from party membership.

We now had only four or five days left until our departure, and there was still no sign of Trung and Mai. I was growing more and more anxious and confused. I did not know what to do. I could only hope for the protection of Heaven and Earth. And truly, the Heaven God never abandons good-hearted people like us. A pleasant surprise was in store for me. A group of cadres from the Danang General Import-Export Company, old friends of mine, were passing through Qui Nhon from an assignment in Tay Nguyen. When they heard that my family and I were leaving the country, they came to pay me a visit and bid me farewell. Among them was Mr. Cam, an old classmate of Trung's. I asked him for help. When he returned to Danang, would he please explain to Trung and Mai our family's real situation? Would he please tell them that they must come back home, come what may?

"Only you can help us," I told him.

He promised that he would definitely try to help us. And he did. After he returned to Danang, that same night he went to the college where Trung and Mai were teaching and made clear to them our family's real situation. The next morning Mr. Nguyen Trong, a representative of the Ministry of Foreign Trade residing in the South Midlands, also talked with them. Trung and Mai came home.

At last, having overcome a myriad of troubles and difficulties, we were all gathered together in Qui Nhon. Only my mother, old and weak, decided not to leave the country. She stayed home.

Our preparations were moving ahead. My inner tension subsided. But my difficulties were not yet at an end. I already had my certificate of exemption from gold duty. Next I needed the management of my old company to certify that I had been a departmental cadre, that I was now retired, that I had completed the procedure for handing over my position, and that I did not owe the company any money. The company's personnel department agreed to provide the necessary certificates. However, they said that they would give them not to me but to the Departures Office. That was not to my liking. What game were they playing?

"That office is secret," I told them. "Outsiders do not know about it."

Eventually they agreed to hand the documents directly to me. I was really lucky!

Then I went to find Mr. Dao Trong Mien, secretary of the party organization at the Nghia Binh Foreign Trade Department, to ask him to certify that I had withdrawn from party membership. But for some reason – perhaps he thought that I was infected with the plague – he hurried away as soon as he caught sight of me. I hurried after him. Without even turning to face me, he said: "I have an emergency" – and disappeared.

I did manage to catch hold of Mr. Nguyen Nghe, a party member who had been my subordinate. I told him to sign the paper for me, but he was too scared.

"Just make a scribble," I told him.

That is what he did.

My paperwork was finally complete. I took it to the house of Mr. Quach Quang Anh. I also brought with me five taels of gold.

This time Mr. Quach Quang Anh himself came down to meet me. He gave me a warm welcome. I handed him all the papers and took out three taels of gold for him.

"I am a cadre only recently returned from Hanoi," I told him. "I have very little money – only a few taels of gold that I would like to give you as a token of my gratitude for the help that you have given my family."

Mr. Anh accepted the gift and thanked me. He reminded me that the boat would leave on June 1.

I was not obliged to pay him any money, but I thought to myself: “They have been a great help to me. It is only right and proper to give them a little money for their trouble. I must not be too greedy. And I must take care. While we are still in Qui Nhon they dare not do anything to us, but once we are at sea our lives will be in their hands. If I pay them nothing at all, they may think that I used my power to bully them and they could easily retaliate by throwing us overboard to attend the Ocean God.”

So I had to give them a little gold. It was not a lot, but they understood and respected me. I had intended to give them five taels, but I had second thoughts and gave them only three.

All our preparations were now complete. We had only to wait for the day and hour of departure. I was satisfied, but I knew from experience that we could not feel secure until the boat was at sea.

On June 1 the boat was ready to set off when the boat owner suddenly received a notice from the province police. It informed him that a boat had left Qui Nhon a few days earlier and reached Phan Thiet but its engine had broken down. He was requested to send a mechanic to Phan Thiet to repair the engine.

This delayed our departure for a few days. Our boat finally put to sea on June 6, 1979.

Chapter 37. At sea

Toward midnight on June 6, the members of our family joined the other passengers gathered at Dong Da Seaport, Qui Nhon to wait to board the *Nghe Quang*. The police added our names to their list. After everyone else got on the boat, it was our turn. The cadres in charge at the dock smirked at me and asked:

“You too, a foreign trade cadre, leaving the country?”

“I am,” I replied.

They started to search my bag. I was not sure how thorough the search was going to be. I was worried and nervous because there were two taels of gold at the bottom of the bag. They searched at one place in the bag, then at another. My heart was beating rapidly.

“If they find the gold,” I thought, “I’ll have to give it up.”

Fortunately, they did not find it. I calmed down. Although they caused us a lot of trouble, they did eventually let us board. So ten members of our family boarded safely (Ai Nga and her family went separately). I was truly happy and thanked Heaven and Earth.

Our family was about to leave Vietnam. This was the second country in which we had lived. Three generations of our family had shared life, hardship, and death with the Vietnamese people. We and the Vietnamese had forged close

friendships and become as blood brothers. Now special circumstances had forced us to tear ourselves away from this beloved land. Old memories passed through my mind and melancholy filled my heart.

Decade had followed decade: the August Revolution, the Anti-French Resistance War, the War Against America to Save the Nation, the liberation of the South and the reunification of the country. I had poured my heart and soul into the Vietnamese Revolution. I considered that I had proven myself worthy of the people of Vietnam as well as the people of my native country. I felt that I had fulfilled my parents' hopes for me. I felt so proud.

Although I was now going far away, the images of my relatives, friends, comrades, and colleagues in Vietnam would always remain deeply imprinted in my memory.

And so our boat set off. It was the last boat that was allowed to leave. Seven boats that were not yet ready to go were prevented from departing. The people who had already paid for places on those boats found themselves bankrupt. All their money was gone and they were left behind at the mercy of the Vietnamese authorities. Many of them ended up in prison. Their fate was a tragic one.

Our family was lucky. We were blessed with the aid and support of Heaven. Our voyage went smoothly. If we had been unable to leave Vietnam, we would have faced hardship and possibly criminal charges. We had good reason to be happy.

Our not very large boat left with over four hundred people on board. We were packed tightly together. There was no space to walk. We had brought with us crackers, dried bread, some bottles of fresh water, sugar, dried lemon, several cans of condensed milk, and a very high quality, thinly sliced root of ginseng that Mr. Dong Loi had given us.

Due to the shortage of space, only old people and women with small children were allowed to sit in the middle of the boat. Everyone else, including our family, had to stand around the edges of the boat and endure the wind, rain, and heat.

For the first few days the weather was hot and dry. We all got sunburned. Then it began to rain and we all got soaked like wet chickens. Fortunately, there was a kind-hearted person standing next to Kim Anh and myself who shared with us a large waterproof nylon sheet to shield us from the rain and sun.

No meals were provided. Passengers ate the food that they had brought with them. Twice a day the boat owner distributed water – a small cupful for each person.

Some youngster stole our crackers, so all we had left was dried bread. Every day I gave each of my children a slice or two with a little condensed milk and also a few slices of ginseng to suck. As Ai Nga had a baby and her father-in-law was

old and sick, we gave her family more food than we ate ourselves. Her in-laws took advantage of this by giving her less food, so Ai Nga and her baby did not have much to eat. Nevertheless, our family survived. Fortunately, we all stayed calm and healthy.

After five days our boat was caught in a storm and sought shelter in a bay along the coast. The next day the boat entered Chinese territorial waters in the vicinity of Zhongshan District. The wind was still very strong, so the boat came in close to the shore. A large group of local militiamen soon arrived to investigate us. Our boat stopped there one day and one night. By the next morning we were ready to continue our voyage. The militia commander asked whether we needed any help. Mr. Quach Quang Anh asked only for some water.

“Do you need us to pull your boat out to sea?” asked the militia commander.

“Yes, please do. A short distance will be enough.”

The militiamen were highly disciplined. After they had provided us with water, Mr. Quach handed them the empty water cans, but their commander told them to give them back to us.

The boat continued on its way. About four or five in the afternoon we reentered Chinese territorial waters and headed for a seaport to ask for directions. As soon as we docked, we saw People’s Liberation Army men standing on a hillock. They opened a grille barrier at the entrance to a small cave in the hillside, pushed out two enormous cannons, and pointed them straight at our boat. We all saw the cannons, but none of us was frightened. We realized that they were just putting on a show for us. We did not believe that they would shoot at us.

When the boat came alongside the dock, two PLA officers stepped on board and asked why we had come. It was the first time that Mr. Quach had ever seen a Chinese army officer. He was so nervous that he lost his composure. He folded his hands, bowed down, and said: “I wish you prosperity.” At that the rest of us quietly giggled.

Mr. Quach followed the officers onto the dock and talked with them for a few minutes. Then they pointed out to us the direction of Hong Kong.

The boat proceeded in the direction indicated. About noon the next day, we thought that we might already be in the territorial waters of Hong Kong. We spotted a small patrol plane. It flew round in a circle several times above our boat. Our captain set off two firecrackers in the air to ask for help, but the pilot ignored us and flew away.

About ten o’clock that night we arrived in the vicinity of Hong Kong. We saw several boats of the Hong Kong Port Police. They stopped our boat and through a loudspeaker informed us that our boat had entered the port illegally and requested us to leave immediately. Our captain used his loudspeaker to tell them that we were refugees from Vietnam and sought refuge.

After a while the port police brought their patrol boats up alongside our boat and talked with us. When they learned that we had a very sick man on board (that was Mr. Nam Quynh, my son-in-law Hoa's father) and also a woman in labor, they took the two of them straight to hospital. Then they pulled our boat to the shore of a small island next to Sunset Peak (Tai Tung Shan). Already gathered there in orderly rows were hundreds of refugee boats from Vietnam, large and small. Our boat was assigned the number 715. It was one of the largest boats. Some of the small boats carried only two or three people. The boats were perched tightly together, noisily bustling like greenflies swarming around a piece of bait. While refugees were at this place, the Hong Kong police gave each person a daily ration of four slices of bread, a few canned baked beans, and a little water.

A few days later Mr. Diep Dat Thanh's boat also arrived. Although our own stomachs were far from full, we shared some of our provisions with Mr. Thanh and his family. His boat had taken longer to reach Hong Kong, so they were hungrier than us.

Chapter 38. In Hong Kong refugee camps

After seven days and nights at sea we had arrived in Hong Kong safe and sound. Now we really felt secure. We offered sincere thanks to Heaven and Earth for having pity on us. We were also grateful to our Vietnamese friends and to Mr. Quach Quang Anh, owner of the *Nghe Quang*, who had given us wholehearted assistance and brought us safely out of Vietnam, a land full of sorrow and disaster, to a better place where we would be able to build a new life.

While preparing to leave the country, we had to face many difficulties and endure many hardships, but we overcame all the difficulties and survived all the hardships. Our family had good luck and good fortune.

After two or three days next to Sunset Peak, the port police pulled our boat alongside the closed refugee camp at Hei Ling Chau Island. We were told to wait another day on the boat. The next day they let us off the boat onto the shore, carried out an inspection, registered our names, and completed other procedures. Then we were admitted to the camp. One or two straw mats were laid on the floor for each family. This was where we were now going to eat, sleep, and live.

After settling down in the camp, we were joined by some of our former neighbors – Mrs. Tau Nam and her family from Dap Da and Mrs. Nam Hoa's children (Bay and her brothers and sisters) from our street in Hanoi. They gave us some water and sugar. We offered water, sugar, and some of our cans of condensed milk to Mr. Dong Loi's family and Mr. Ang's family. They were very glad to have them. Provisions were the most precious thing at that time.

Relatives and friends of ours who were already at the camp were surprised when we joined them. None of them had expected that our family would be able to leave Vietnam. Even if we had obtained money to buy places on a boat, surely the Vietnamese authorities would not have allowed us to leave. Moreover, our family was large and scattered around the country. How could we possibly have gathered together at short notice?

We heard from Mr. Ang that when his son A Ich had told him that Uncle Hing Quang had just arrived he had replied:

“You must be daydreaming! There’s no way he can leave!”

“No, it’s true. Uncle Quang really is here. He waved at me.”

Mr. Ang still did not believe him. He thought that A Ich had mistaken someone else for me. When our family entered the building and settled down next to him, he was full of admiration and respect.

The camp was not large, but about a thousand people had already been packed into it. There was not even enough space to stretch your legs. The faucets ran very slowly and there were too few toilets. In the morning people rushed about like bees emerging from their hive. People fought to gain access to the faucets and to the toilets.

When the time came for the distribution of drinking water, the refugees from North Vietnam were already waiting in a long line. They had more experience of waiting in line. They had been waiting since the crack of dawn, holding their bowls, cans, pots, pans, and washbasins. No room was left for us southerners. That led to frequent arguments and fights. Some even had knives with them and tried to kill one another. The malicious Hong Kong police used their power to bully the refugees. On the slightest pretext they would start lashing out with their fists and feet. The victims dared not complain. It was pitiful!

More cunning and ruthless in their methods were the immigration officials. “Using poison to treat poison,” they recruited a few vicious thugs from among the early arrivals and paid them a pittance to abuse the refugees who came later. These thugs, backed up by the police, obeyed orders like attack dogs. They yelled at refugees, beat them up, and broke up their gatherings.

Some young men newly arrived from Haiphong could not bear the brutality of the police and hired thugs. Threatening them with knives, they warned:

“If you continue to bully us, we’ll exchange our lives for yours.”

From then on the police and hired thugs were less aggressive.

A few days later, the Hong Kong Immigration Agency had our photographs taken and carried out some procedures.

We stayed at the camp on Hei Ling Chau Island for a week. Then the police moved us to another closed camp – the Chi Ma Wan Center on Lantau Island. This camp had previously been a hostel for homeless and unemployed young men. It

was surrounded by high barbed-wire fences, with a single gate for entry and exit. It was not very large, but – just like Hei Ling Chau – it held about a thousand refugees. The police gave each family one or two straw mats on which to sit and sleep. Each person received a daily ration of four slices of white bread, half a can of hot baked beans, a small orange, and some drinking water. On getting up in the morning and before going to sleep at night, all the refugees had to stand in line to greet the police and answer roll call – just like prisoners.

There was a woman security guard at the camp, about forty years old, who always looked as angry as a devil. She never showed the slightest trace of a smile. One day she made a cup of tea and instead of drinking it herself came and gave it to Kim Anh. Everyone was surprised to see her do that. She had a hard face but a kind heart.

A few days after our arrival at Chi Ma Wan, a couple of troublemakers came along – one from our boat, the other from a different boat. They looked very angry, as though they wanted to kill someone. They came looking for us in order to start a quarrel.

“Who here is a Viet Cong?” they demanded.

When they came face to face with us and saw that our family had several strong young men, they shut up and had soon quietly disappeared. We never saw them again.

We stayed at Chi Ma Wan for one month. (At that time Ai Nga’s and Hoa’s son Loi was just out of the cradle.) Then the police moved us to Kai Tak camp – an open camp. The Hong Kong Immigration Agency sent a large contingent of armed police and transported us in prison vans. That embarrassed and upset us all, but there was nothing we could do. We ignored them and let them do whatever they liked.

Kai Tak was a very large camp, holding 10,000 people. There were many different blocks. Like most people from the *Nghe Quang*, our family was housed in Block A. The accommodation was very cramped. There were three layers of single bunk beds, each of which had to be shared by two people. Our family was allocated four beds. Luckily, Hung and Manh got jobs and were able to sleep at their workplaces. We also bought some folding beds. So for the time being we were not too crowded.

The situation in most of the refugee camps, and especially at Kai Tak, was very complicated. There were people of all kinds, with three main religions. There were also hooligans and criminals. Within just two days of our arrival we had already observed them stealing, robbing, and fighting. People were often abused. Some were murdered for their possessions.

Two of the criminals, twins named Phung Son and Phung Hai, were from Qui Nhon. They lived in a different camp, but collaborated with some hooligans at

Kai Tak. One night they stole a gold chain from a woman in Block B, next to our block. A young man nearby happened to be awake and see them do it. Although he would not have dared inform on them, they took a knife and slashed him to death. We were always nervous, anxious, and scared. We were never able to eat or sleep in peace.

A few days after our arrival, officials from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and from the immigration agencies of various countries came to the camp to prepare lists of names and carry out procedures for the admission of refugees. The US Immigration and Naturalization Service accepted our whole family for resettlement in the United States. We were very happy.

When we first arrived at the camp, we were not yet free to come and go. Two meals were distributed daily. A meal consisted of a box of cooked rice and a piece of stir-fried pig intestine with squash, black bean sprouts, or pickled mustard greens. This was the first time in the two months or so since we had left Vietnam that we got to eat rice, so at first we were very happy. However, as the food was the same day in and day out, after a while we grew sick and tired of those meals, though we had to swallow them in order to survive one more day. We continued eating them until we were free to go out and buy our own food.

One day a young thug in our camp bullied and beat Thang and there was a fight between them. We did not know why it happened. A few hours later, a young Vietnamese came to see us. He threatened Thang and us:

“I am Nguyen Van Long from Danang. I used to work for the CIA. I eat human liver and suck human blood.”

When he was finished, I responded calmly:

“Ah, I have a nephew who also likes to do things like that.”

Hearing this exchange, Hung told Manh:

“Go and ask Brother Ty to come here at once.”

“Which Brother Ty is that?” asked Mr. Long.

“The one who lives in your block,” said I.

We mentioned Brother Ty in order to let him know that we were not alone and that we were not frightened of him. In fact, we did not know whether Brother Ty was really capable of scaring him. So we were surprised to see that he showed signs of fear at the mention of Ty’s name. He stopped talking and quietly disappeared.

About an hour later he returned and spoke to me in a very polite and apologetic tone:

“I apologize. Please accept my apology. I misunderstood the situation. I heard people say that your son had beaten someone else’s son. I felt that it wasn’t

fair, so I came to talk to you. Now I realize that it was the other guy's son who bullied your son. I am so sorry."

"Well, never mind," I said with a laugh. "Let's forget it."

Brother Ty was the son of Mr. Tran Hoan Thong. He had been an officer of the military police in Hanoi. While holding that position he had often fought with the civilian police and committed thefts and robberies. He had been in prison many times. As soon as he reached Hong Kong and entered Kai Tak, he had begun fighting with other refugees in the camp. As a former military police officer, he was trained in the martial arts. He had a quick temper. Even the tiniest thing could provoke him to violence, so most people dared not tease him. Later I heard from friends that he had got into many fights in the camp and had been taken off to prison several times.

Fortunately for us, we were able to use one bully to protect ourselves against another. However, we did not appeal for help to Brother Ty again, because too close an association with him might have got us into trouble. For the rest of our stay at Kai Tak no one dared bully us. We were respected even by people who had worked for the old puppet government.

Nevertheless, we continued to run into complications.

One day a young man named Thanh, who had arrived with us on the *Nghe Quang*, came to ask me to speak on his behalf with the boat owner, Mr. Quach Quang Anh, and persuade him to return some gold that Thanh had overpaid.

"Mr. Quach Quang Anh is a Chiuchow. I cannot speak to a Chiuchow. You'll have to go and ask Mr. Truong Luong Huu for help."

On hearing this name he fell silent, because he knew that before Liberation Mr. Truong Luong Huu had been best friends with the notorious Qui Nhon drug dealer Mr. Tau Xi. No one dared mess with them.

Soon after this there arrived in the camp a bloodhound named Mr. Diep Bao Wong, a Hainanese native of Tuy Hoa in Phu Yen Province who had come to Hong Kong through China from Hanoi. Together with a former secret agent of the Saigon puppet government named Mr. Nguyen Khang, he went sleuthing around various refugee camps in search of former Overseas Chinese cadres from North Vietnam. With the aid of threats and inducements, they extracted from them general intelligence information about Vietnam.

A few former Overseas Chinese cadres took advantage of this situation for their own benefit. Others were afraid that evidence might be presented against them by way of revenge, spoiling their chances of immigration for permanent settlement. They agreed to serve as unpaid informants in the hope of pleasing the Americans and being accepted for resettlement in the United States. There were also a few who agreed to perform disloyal acts because they imagined that thereby

they could win the Americans' trust and obtain gainful employment from them. So there were a few people who sold their souls and acted against their conscience. Ironically, however, they received very little for their dirty work. Mr. Khang paid each of them 30 Hong Kong dollars – barely enough for a single meal in a restaurant.[1] He cynically told them: "You took the day off work to talk to us, so we are paying you compensation for your lost wages."

Let us take pity on those who sold their souls for a pittance. Their hopes were dashed: none of them was accepted for resettlement in the United States. They applied to go to Canada, Australia, and other countries.

Let me tell you a funny story about Mr. Ton Nhon Hung, who was once a best friend of mine. In the refugee camp he was always worrying about resettlement. Every day he called me at my work to ask what he should do. I was always glad to advise people as best I could, especially when it was a good friend who sought my advice. However, when he was accepted for resettlement in Canada he did not tell me but left without even saying goodbye. Perhaps he was worried that I might follow him to Canada and compete with him for any employment opportunities. As the proverb says: "Friends are like birds nestling together in the dark forest at night and waiting impatiently for the dawn, when they will go their separate ways."

One day Mr. Diep Bao Wong brought Mr. Khang to see me. He asked me to come outside to talk.

"I am on the staff of the CIA," said Mr. Khang. "I would like to talk with you about the situation in Vietnam."

"I have to go to work now," I replied. "Please come to see me some other day."

After that I avoided them. Mr. Wong knew that in Hanoi I had worked at the Ministry of Foreign Trade, but he did not know exactly what kind of work I had done there.

A few days later, I received a telephone call at my work from a Vietnamese man. (I had given my work telephone number only to Mr. Ton Nhon Hung; perhaps this man had got it from him.) He told me that his name was Tu and that he was Mr. Khang's superior at the CIA. Then he invited me to come around to his place to talk about the situation in Vietnam.

"Well," I replied, "if you want to know what the situation was ten years ago, then I can tell you. I am not well informed about the current situation."

"But you arrived from Vietnam quite recently, isn't that so?"

"Yes, but I retired long ago."

"You are not yet of retirement age."

"True, but I am Chinese. You must surely understand my circumstances."

“Yes, I understand. I am interested in the current situation in Vietnam, not in the past. Some people have already talked with me about the current situation, so I don’t really need to see you. That is all. Thank you.”

I felt happy and safe. I had been lucky enough to avoid another trap. I thanked Heaven and Earth. I knew that if I did not fully satisfy those people they might easily do me harm or even send me to serve God in Heaven. I had to stay calm, clever, and careful. I should not oppose them directly. I would suffer for it if I did.

In order to protect myself against Mr. Diep Bao Wong, I “used poison to treat poison.” At that time the Hong Kong newspapers were reporting that the immigration authorities intended to send all Chinese refugees who had arrived from the mainland back to China. They would not be allowed to remain in Hong Kong. I was overjoyed to see that, because I knew that Mr. Wong had just arrived in Hong Kong from mainland China.

“I can use this to scare him,” I thought to myself, “so that he will make no trouble for me.”

I immediately went to buy some newspapers and distributed them among my relatives, who passed them on to others in the camp. I also gave a newspaper to the wife of Mr. Hoang Khac Ky. She was happy because Mr. Wong often made trouble for them. After reading the article she knew how to deal with Mr. Wong. She showed him the article.

“Have you seen this?” she asked. “From now on please do not bother us. If you do, I shall report you to the immigration authorities so that they can arrest you and send you back to China. You deserve it.”

Mr. Wong was frightened. He begged her not to report him and promised to make no more trouble.

Later I myself went to see Mr. Wong.

“You and I are compatriots,” I told him. “I’m asking you to show a little kindness and not to go around saying bad things.”

“I don’t dare,” he replied. “I promise not to say any bad things.”

So we achieved the desired result. We dampened Mr. Wong’s spirit. Although he continued making trouble for other people, such as Mr. Hoang Khac Thanh, Mr. Diep Nang Tin, Mr. Han Tu Phung, Mr. Truong Tho Xuong, Mr. Ton Nhon Hung and his brother, and Mr. Duong Quang Ngoc, from that time on he was always polite to our family and caused us no trouble. Nor did he make trouble for the family of Mr. Hoang Khac Ky.

One day I asked Mr. Wong: “Did you say anything about me to Mr. Khang?”

“No, I never said anything about you to him.”

Soon after that, American immigration officials came to tell our family to go to their office to take an oath and fill in papers for our resettlement in the United States. This proved that Mr. Wong had not in fact made any trouble for us.

Despite intimidation by a bull-headed horse-faced thug, despite threats and inducements, I stood firm. While in the refugee camps I never did anything against my conscience. That made me feel proud and worthy of my friends and of the Vietnamese people.

Our whole family had reached Hong Kong safely. This was a miracle. Some people admired us and were glad for us; others were jealous. When it became known that our family had been accepted for resettlement in the United States, the jealous people were not happy. They spread lies about us and even produced evidence to stoke controversy. As we were not yet allowed free passage in and out of the camp, we asked relatives about living conditions and employment opportunities in Hong Kong. They did not answer us.

A few days after we arrived at Kai Tak, Mrs. Diep Lanh came to me and said:

“Mr. Hing Quang, when you were in Qui Nhon you borrowed a tael of gold from us. Please repay it now, so that our daughter Binh can buy things to take to America.”

At first I thought that she herself had come up with this idea, because she regretted having given me the gold. I agreed to pay it back, but explained that I was not yet in a position to do so. I went to see her husband, Mr. Lim Quang, reminded him that he and his wife had given me a tael of gold, and told him that now his wife had asked me to repay it.

“Can you give it to her?” he asked.

Then I knew for sure that it was his idea and not only hers.

“I don’t have any gold leaf,” I said. “I have only a gold bar. Will that do?”

“Fine,” he replied.

I was going to give them a gold bar. But I changed my mind. The previous day I had asked Mrs. Lanh’s brother, Mr. Diep Bao Tung, to sell a gold bar for me and he had brought me back 1,700 Hong Kong dollars, so I gave Mr. and Mrs. Lim Quang that money instead of a gold bar. It came as a surprise to them and they were very happy. A few days later, however, the price of gold in Hong Kong suddenly shot up to 4,000 Hong Kong dollars per tael. Mr. and Mrs. Lim Quang must have been chagrined and angry at me.

Mr. and Mrs. Lim Quang were not really short of money. While getting ready to go to the United States, Mr. Lim Quang was afraid that he might be robbed, so he brought a small bag of diamonds and asked me to keep it safe for him.

During our stays at Chi Ma Wan and Kai Tak camps, I taught our children Cantonese to enable them to apply for jobs once they were allowed to do so. When we were free to leave the camp, all our children did in fact find jobs. Trung and Ai Hoa worked at toy factories, Cuong and Thang at a mattress factory, and Hung and Manh at a food processing company at Tsuen Wan.[2] After a while Hung and Manh left their jobs because they were too far away from the camp and looked for other jobs.

Soon after we were allowed to leave the camp, I took Hung along with me to look for a post office. I wanted to send telegrams to my mother and sisters in Vietnam and let them know that we had arrived safely in Hong Kong. We walked around for a long time but could not find a post office. Then we went to see old friends of mine at the reception office of a shipping agency and ask them to help us find some of the buyers with whom I had done business in the old days.

When my old friend Mr. Tu Do, assistant director of the reception office, heard that we had come, he came out to welcome us and invited us in for tea. After a brief exchange of greetings, I told him about our situation. He was very sympathetic and immediately wrote down the addresses of several of my old business partners. I expressed my gratitude and we said goodbye.

First we visited the Tien Shang Hong Company. Mr. La Luong, the director, and Mr. Du Duc Duc, the assistant director, received us and invited us in for tea. After we had exchanged greetings, I asked them to introduce us to potential employers. They were willing to help.

“How many of you are looking for jobs?” they asked.

“Ten of us,” I replied. That included Ai Nga’s husband Hoa and Mr. Diep Bao Phong and his son.

They arranged for us all to work at their tea-processing factory, with me in charge of the others. I thanked them and said goodbye. Mr. Duc showed us the way to the elevator. Then he took out some Hong Kong banknotes and offered them to Hung. I sincerely thanked him but declined.

“In the past,” I thought to myself, “I was their business partner. Now I am a refugee. I don’t want them to think that we’ve come begging for money. It’s enough that they have found jobs for us.”

We did not go to work for them after all. Later we all found other jobs.

Next Hung and I went looking for Mr. To Ke Thao, director of the Shun Shang Import-Export Company. It was I who had originally introduced Mr. Thao as a trading partner for Vietnam’s import-export companies. The friendship between Mr. Thao and myself was very special. Not having seen one another for over ten years, we were so happy to meet again! Mr. Thao invited us in for tea. After exchanging greetings, I asked him to give me directions to the post office.

“Do you want to send a telegram?” he asked.

“Yes, to Vietnam.”

He laughed.

“We have a post office right here.”

What Mr. Thao meant was that the Shun Shang Company had a fax machine. He asked his secretary to fax my message right away. Then he took out 3,000 Hong Kong dollars and offered them to me.

“This is my personal gift to you. We’ll work something out later.”

I tried to decline, but Mr. Thao insisted.

“Please don’t be shy. We are best friends, you and I. You’ve been of enormous help to me. This is just a little gift to show my appreciation. I’ll give you more help later on.”

We talked for a long time. I saw that I could not refuse the gift. I asked Mr. Thao how his business was doing. Again he thanked me for the enormous help I had rendered his company by giving him the opportunity to trade with Vietnam’s import-export companies. He told me that the Shun Shang Company was doing very well. Its total capital was now a hundred million Hong Kong dollars. I was impressed and felt very happy for him. In just over ten years Mr. Thao had grown from an ordinary worker into a big capitalist. It was a miracle. I sincerely wished him even greater success. Then I asked him to arrange employment for members of my family. He agreed without hesitation.

“For how many people?” he asked.

“Ten,” I replied.

“I’ll arrange it step by step.”

First Mr. Thao asked Hung to come and help manage his warehouse. Then he introduced Manh to his brother, who owned the Hoi Sang Hong Dried Seafood Store. Manh was given a job accompanying their truck to help deliver goods.

I was found work as a salesman and bookkeeper for the Lee Shang Hong Dried Seafood Store. The work was quite hard. The store was crowded with customers. I had to use 16 x 1/4 ounce English scales to weigh each portion of food, calculate the sum in Hong Kong money, and make out the receipt. All this had to be done quickly. It required a lot of concentration. After a few months I asked Mr. Thao for another job. He arranged for me to work at the Shun Hing Frozen Seafood Company, which was owned by Mr. Shim Shang’s son. This was a small business that sold frozen seafood. It suited me very well. Every day I wrote receipts, recorded sales in the account book, and went to the bank to pay money in and take money out. When I had the time, I went to collect money from customers. The work was easy and convenient and the salary was high. I remained in this job until I left Hong Kong.

One day Mr. Thao told me:

“Recently I visited Vinacor and met the director. I told them about your situation – that you had left Vietnam and were in Hong Kong. I also told them that for old friendship’s sake I am looking for a job for you. Did they have any ideas? They were sympathetic. They said that you are a very good person and told me to try to help you. They said that despite the current situation they still have good feelings about you. They said that you would always be their good friend.”

I was very happy to hear that and felt comforted.

A little later, on the occasion of Mr. Thao’s house-warming party, I gave him a huge painting on glass entitled *Boats Sail the Sea Safely with a Good Wind*. Mr. Thao showed his appreciation by immediately hanging it on the wall by the front door, so that it would be seen by everyone coming in or going out, including Vinacor staff.

While working for Shun Hing, I also acted as an agent for the Shun Shang Company, selling swift nests. In addition to any profit, which depended on the price, for every kilogram I sold I received a bonus of 50 Hong Kong dollars. So our income was good and we lived comfortably.

On October 1, 1979, while we were at Kai Tak camp, Mai gave birth to Dinh.

On the first day of the lunar new year 1980, the first transport of refugees from Vietnam set sail for the Philippines to await resettlement in the United States. Among them were Nga and her family.

After a while we received a letter from Nga in the Philippines.

“The situation here,” she wrote, “is terrible. The camp is on an isolated island without inhabitants or housing. We refugees have to gather and chop wood to build huts for ourselves. We are short of everything. The jungle is full of peril. The water is unsafe to drink. The mountain is beautiful but there is not enough air to breathe. Most of the refugees have caught serious diseases like malaria, cholera, typhoid fever, and dysentery. There is no medicine. Every day another person dies. The situation inside the camp is also very difficult. There are frequent arguments, fights, thefts, even murders. It is really terrible here! Apply to go to other countries if you like, but stay away from the Philippines! It’s very dangerous here!”

After receiving this alarming letter, we were very worried for Nga and her family. We did not know whether they would be able to endure such conditions. We regretted letting them go to the Philippines. We also worried about our own prospects for resettlement.

It was at this time that the US Immigration Agency put up notices in the refugee camps saying that people over 60 years old would fly directly to the United States but everyone else would go first by boat to the Philippines and remain there

for a period of anywhere from three months to three years before continuing to the United States.

A few months later, American immigration officials came and invited us to their office to complete the paperwork for our resettlement in the United States.

“Do we have to go to the Philippines?” I asked them.

“Yes, you do.”

“How long shall we have to stay there?”

“Anywhere from three months to three years.”

“But your notices say that people over 60 years old don’t have to go to the Philippines. I am over 60, so that should apply to me. Now you tell me that I do have to go. How can that be?”

“We have not heard about that.”

I thought to myself: “I was a member of the Communist Party. If the Americans want to harm me, they may send me to the Philippines and even after three years refuse us entry to the United States. What would we do then? It is better for us to stay here in Hong Kong and apply to go to some other country. Or we may find a way to stay on in Hong Kong.”

So we declined the offer to resettle in the United States.

Next we applied to go to Canada, but camp officials told us: “As you refused an offer to resettle in the United States, Canada will not accept you.”

“Well then, send us to any other country willing to accept us. We want to leave the camp as soon as possible.”

“Only England will accept you. Will you go?”

“Yes, we’ll go.”

“In England there are no cars. There are no skyscrapers. Do you still want to go?”

“Yes, we don’t mind.”

So we registered for resettlement in England.

A long time passed and we heard no more about it. We were anxious. What was going on?

Then Mr. Lam Quang, the son of Mr. Lam Minh Chau, told us that his parents, brothers, and sisters were already settled in England. I was very happy to hear that. I asked him to write to his father and ask him to apply for our family to resettle in England, in the same place as where his family lived. I too wrote to Mr. Chau many times, but never received an answer.

Eventually we were interviewed by officials from the British Home Office. They asked us to complete some procedures for resettlement in England. It took a long time. I asked them whether our whole family, including Trung, Mai, and their son, could travel together. They agreed.

Finally all the procedures were completed.

“Everything is ready,” they told us. “Now you have to go to England. Don’t hide away any more.”

We thanked them.

When Mr. Lim Quang heard that we had decided to resettle in England, he came to give me some advice.

“Mr. Quang,” he said, “you should think again. It’s better to go to America.”

“Don’t worry,” I replied. “Wherever we go we’ll be OK. My children are hardworking and know English. We can work and survive anywhere. I don’t want to go to America. I would be in a very difficult situation there.”

He said no more.

Before our departure for England, I talked with Mr. To Ke Thao and Mr. To Thanh, Mr. Thao’s blood brother and chief executive of the Shun Shang Company.

“We used to be good friends,” I told them. “Now I am a refugee in Hong Kong. You have both helped me. I really appreciate all your help.”

“Please don’t say that,” they replied. “It is really we who should thank you, because it was you who helped and supported us when we were just starting our business. Now it has grown big, but we have never forgotten how much we owe to you. Later, if you want to start a business in Canada or the United States, we shall do our best to help and support you. So don’t worry. If you need to find jobs, we can help you with that too, because we have a lot of connections.”

“We were accepted by the United States, but now we have decided to go to England instead. Do you know anything about the situation in England?”

“We don’t know much about England. When you have settled, let us know about the situation there. We shall try our best to help you.”

It turned out that life in England was very comfortable. I did not need to ask them for any more help.

During our stay at the Kai Tak refugee camp I helped some friends sell various products. I sold Chinese medicines for Mr. Diep Bao Wong and Mr. Xi Ho, incense for Mr. Diep Bao Phong, swift nests for Mr. Duong Quang Ngoc and Mr. Au Bang Lien, and bear bile for Mr. Hoang Trung. However, I did not accept any commission. When I sold Chinese medicines for Mr. Xi Ho for 1,700 Hong Kong dollars, he took 1,000 and left me 700 as commission, but I refused to take it. (At that time 700 Hong Kong dollars were equivalent to over 20 days’ salary.) I did not treat it as business. I just wanted to help.

I also helped Mr. Ngo Khon Phuc to ask his brother-in-law Mr. Diep Kinh to apply for him and his family to resettle in the United States. He was grateful to me.

In general, I was always happy to help anyone in any matter to the best of my ability. There were many people who appreciated my help and loved me.

Notes

[1] At that time one Hong Kong dollar was equivalent to about 18 US cents. It is currently worth 13 US cents.

[2] Tsuen Wan is in the western part of Hong Kong's New Territories.

Chapter 39. We resettle in England

In the last week of July 1980, our family was sent to an assembly area at A Cai Lu camp to prepare for departure. We were accommodated there together with Mr. Diep Nang Tin's family. They had arrived some time before us and were waiting to go to Canada but did not understand why it was taking so long. Mr. Tin told me that his family had been interviewed by American immigration officials but a group of people in cahoots with Mr. Diep Bao Wong and Mr. Nguyen Khang had threatened them and written a letter denouncing them to the US Immigration Agency. Some people, he added, had sold their souls cheap and agreed to do things against their conscience.

I advised Mr. Tin not to withdraw their application to resettle in Canada. They should just wait. Canada bordered on the United States and they would easily be able to visit their relatives there. Mr. Tin accepted my advice.

On the afternoon of August 6, 1980, our family left Hong Kong for England. Before our group set off, the Catholic Church in Hong Kong sent nuns to pray for our safe journey and wish us good luck.

On August 7, 1980, we arrived safely at London's Heathrow Airport. Our reception was very different from the way in which we had been treated upon our arrival in Hong Kong.

When we stepped into the reception room, we saw the director of the English refugee camp, members of his staff, and Chinese and Vietnamese interpreters. They welcomed us with open arms. This reassured us and put us at ease, as though we were coming home.

Then we were taken to a van and driven to the Morton Hall camp in Swinderby, Lincolnshire. When we arrived there, we did some paperwork.

At that time the British Home Office was willing to allow my mother to join us, but she did not want to come. She was old and weak and afraid of the cold weather in England. She preferred to remain near her two daughters who were taking care of her.

In October 1980 Nga and her family were allowed to leave the Philippines and resettle in the United States.

We stayed at the camp for about six months. We used the time to study the English language and English customs and manners. Hung, Trung, and Manh went to Lincoln to study advanced English.

When preparations were being made for us to move out of the camp, we asked to go to Liverpool and live near the families of Mr. Lam and Mr. Chau. I also wrote to Mr. Chau asking him to apply for us to live near his family. I waited a long time but received no reply. Later I learned that his family did not want us to come and live near them.

On January 29, 1981, our family was settled in a new house in Mansfield, Nottinghamshire. We lived in one apartment and Trung's family in another.

A week later Hung got a job in Scotland. The rest of us attended English classes. Cuong and Manh went to train as mechanics. Thang started going to school. Trung, Hoa, Cuong, and Manh all found jobs.

While we were living in Mansfield, some English Christians came to our house from near and far to teach us English or to make friends with us. Among them were Mr. Tony's family from Lincoln, a teacher named Mrs. Moore from Swindon, Miss Reader, and Mr. Ravenshead. They were good friends to our family. We shall always remember them.

We had lived in Mansfield for about a year when we received an unexpected telegram from my sister Hanh in Vietnam telling us that Minh and Chanh had left Vietnam and asking us to find out their exact whereabouts.

We requested the refugee camp near Derby to ask the UNHCR to find them. A few days later we were informed that Minh and Chanh had arrived in Hong Kong and were in the Wailingchow camp. I immediately sent sister Hanh a telegram to let her know. Then Kim Anh and I asked Trung, Hoa, and Hung to make a family reunion application for them to join us in England. At first the Home Office refused. We asked English friends and a Member of Parliament to intervene on our behalf, but without any result. At the same time, we asked Nga and her husband and friends to apply for them to settle in the United States. We offered to pay all the expenses. But there was still no result.

We kept on applying, however, and eventually Heaven took pity on us. The Home Office allowed them to join us, but on the condition that after settling in England they would not apply for anyone else to come. If they agreed they could come; otherwise they would have to remain in the camp in Hong Kong.

We thought it best to bring Minh and Chanh to England as soon as possible. The sooner they left the Wailingchow camp the better, because it was a closed camp. People in that type of camp would be returned to Vietnam if no other country would take them. That would be dangerous. So we had to accept the condition set by the Home Office.

On August 11, 1983, after exactly one year at the Wailingchow camp, Minh and Chanh left for England and came to live with us. Kim Anh and I loved and took care of them as though they were our own children.

It was very fortunate that the Home Office allowed Minh and Chanh to join us, because there were still hundreds of thousands of refugees from Vietnam living in closed camps in Hong Kong and other countries whom no country had accepted for resettlement. They were waiting to be sent back to Vietnam, where they would face suffering and ill-treatment.

However, when Minh and Chanh arrived in England they were not satisfied, because they both had great ambitions. They aspired to go to the United States, Canada, or Australia in order to make huge fortunes. They regarded living in England as a waste of their talents. They were also dissatisfied at not being able to apply for their family to join them. They were unhappy that we could do nothing more for them. We came to regret that we had applied for them to join us in England. But what had happened had happened.

We lived in Mansfield for over two years. In May 1983 Mai gave birth to Han Anh. Sammy followed in January 1986.

Hoa married Stephen D. Shenfield. She gave birth to Meili in 1986 and to Natasha in 1988.

On December 1, 1983, Hung's wife Ho Minh Chung was admitted to England for reunion with Hung. In August 1984 she gave birth to a daughter, Chau.

Nga, her husband, and their son Loi came to England to visit us.

At the beginning of 1986, two weeks after Sammy's birth, our old landlord found a house for Trung, Mai, and their children in the city of Nottingham. In the middle of January they moved in. Half a year later, he found us a house near Trung's family and we too moved there.

Before we moved to Nottingham, Kim Anh and I asked Minh and Chanh many times to move there with us so that we could look after them and they could continue their education. Each time they refused to go. We kept on asking them until finally they told us: "Living with your family, we have lost our freedom."

After that we did not ask them again. We just accepted their attitude. Kim Anh and I asked Trung to ask his landlord to find a house for them to rent. He was glad to help, but the local council objected. They said that Minh and Chanh were still minors and could not live on their own. Later, after repeated requests, they gave in. Minh and Chanh rented a house in Mansfield and continued their education.

On April 5, 1989, all the members of our family were naturalized and became British citizens. That was a happy day for us.

Although several decades have passed since the August Revolution of 1945, we Overseas Chinese in Vietnam were never allowed to undergo naturalization. The Vietnamese government said that we were Chinese. The Chinese government said that we were Vietnamese of Chinese origin and regarded us as Vietnamese. We were like a pendulum that went on swinging until we left Vietnam. So when the Vietnamese party and government conducted an anti-China policy, they also targeted us Overseas Chinese and expelled masses of us from Vietnam.

Now, however, we had been officially naturalized in Britain. That was a happy occasion. From now on we could reside safely, earn our living, and build our new life.

Chapter 40. I take Cuong to the homeland to marry

After our family had been in Nottingham for a while, Hoa and Hung told me that many young people among the Overseas Chinese from Vietnam were going to China to marry and that the Home Office was allowing their spouses to join them in England. Kim Anh and I decided that I should take Cuong to China to find him a wife. Mr. Lam Minh Chau heard of our plans and introduced us to his niece Lam Que Huong. In October 1988 I took Cuong to Hainan to marry. I had been away from the homeland for thirty years. Now I had the chance to return and visit Sister Neo, other relatives, and friends.

After the wedding celebrations I went to see relatives and friends. We were all very happy. While I was in Hainan, I received visits from Mr. Han Khoan Sieu, chairman of the People's Council of Fu Qing Town, and from Mr. Lam, secretary of the town's party committee. Mr. Khoan Sieu thanked and praised me. He said that when I sent my newspaper article the town cadres had been very happy. They had read it and passed it around. He had kept it as a souvenir. He still had it.

"Local people praise you," he told me. "We regard you as a patriotic Overseas Chinese concerned for your homeland."

I was treated well in Hainan. People sympathized with me and appreciated me highly.

At the end of 1989, Manh married Han Shiu Shan, who was also from Hainan. She had been living in Hong Kong and had come to England to study. On July 8, 1990, Shan gave birth to twin boys, Hao Kiet and Thieu Bao. On January 1, 1997, she had another son, Han Hy.

In 1990 Hoa and her husband and two daughters went to live in the United States.

At the beginning of 1990, Cuong's wife Que Huong received a notice from the British Embassy in Beijing asking her to come with an interpreter to be interviewed for admission to Britain. Huong asked a relative to accompany her. At

first he seemed willing to help, but for some reason he changed his mind. So I had to go to Hainan again, take Huong to Beijing, and interpret for her. After the interview we were told that as I was her father-in-law they could not accept the application. She had to make a new application and bring an interpreter who was not related to her.

Huong had to wait 2—3 months before she received a notice for a new interview. Before setting off again for Hainan, I wrote a letter to Mr. Han Lan Dinh in Beijing. He was a good friend and comrade of mine. We had worked together during the Anti-French Resistance. I asked him to act as Huong's interpreter. He was very glad to help. Near the appointed time I returned to the homeland and took Huong to Beijing. We stayed at the home of Mr. Han Lan Dinh. He and his wife welcomed us with open arms. He took Huong and myself to see many tourist sights, including the Forbidden City, the Thirty Royal Tombs, the Great Wall of China, Tienanmen Square, Chairman Mao's mausoleum, the Imperial Palace, and the Workers Stadium.

Mr. Han Lan Dinh and I had not seen one another for several decades. We were overwhelmed. We talked all night. It was very interesting. He told me about the situation of some other old friends who had returned to China from Vietnam and their lives after resettlement.

On the day of the interview Huong was afraid that if Mr. Han Lan Dinh acted as her interpreter the embassy staff might think that he was a cousin and then the application would fail again. As she knew Mandarin, she asked me to let her go by herself. This time the interview was a success, but the embassy official said that Huong's case was an immigration matter so they had to obtain the approval of the Home Office. Again Huong had to return home to wait.

I was worried about traveling so much and spending so much money, so I too stayed in Hainan to wait. I waited about a month, but still there was no news. It was summertime and very hot. My children, concerned for my health under these conditions, wrote urging me to hurry back to England and wait there. That is what I did. A few months later, our family were glad to hear that Huong had received a letter from the British Embassy informing her that the Home Office had approved her immigration.

Yet again I set off for the homeland. On November 28, 1990, Huong started her journey to England. She arrived in Nottingham and was reunited with Cuong on December 2. Everyone was safe and sound and we were all happy.

On June 16, 1996, Huong gave birth to a son – Thanh Dinh (Sheng Dinh).

During one of my stays in Hainan, Mr. Bon Dan Loi brought a group of Hainanese from Los Angeles to attend the opening of a community school in his hometown. He invited me to join them at the opening ceremony and at the

celebration that would follow. The opening ceremony was very dignified and joyful. Unfortunately, there were no invitation cards to the celebration left for us. So Mr. Dan Loi took me, Sister Neo, and Huong to see Mr. Han Khon Nguyen, organizer of the celebration and head of the Fu Qing Overseas Chinese Department.

“This,” he said, “is my good friend Mr. Han Hing Quang, with his sister and his daughter-in-law. Please arrange three special seats for them at the celebration and take good care of them. Mr. Quang was a guest of Prime Minister Chou Enlai.”

Mr. Khon Nguyen did as he was told and took good care of us.

That night the three of us were invited to the opera. Mr. Bon Dan Loi himself arranged seats for us. He loved me very much and showed great concern for me. It moved me to tears. I can never forget the deep feeling between us.

At the celebration Mrs. Diep Lanh sat next to me, while Mr. Han Tham Nguyen sat on the chair in front of me. He was from Hong Kong. I used to help him sell swift nests. I did not spot him, but he spotted me. It was over ten years since we had seen one another and I was now fatter and whiter than I had been at the refugee camp, so he did not recognize me right away. He turned his head and asked Mrs. Lanh: “Who is this?”

“This is Mr. Hing Quang,” she replied.

He apologized immediately.

“I’m old and it’s over ten years since we met. I really couldn’t recognize you. I’m so sorry.”

“It’s alright,” I said.

He explained to Mrs. Lanh: “When he was in Hong Kong, Mr. Hing Quang helped me make a lot of money. I really appreciated his help.”

I smiled and said: “I’m so glad that you remember me.”

A moment later Mr. Han Khoan Sieu, chairman of the Fu Qing Town People’s Council, came to greet me. Some local cadres saw that and asked him:

“Do you know this man?”

“I made his acquaintance long ago, when he was a journalist. He is a patriotic Overseas Chinese.”

On this visit to the homeland, I not only visited relatives but also helped the local authorities. A few years previously, they had conducted a campaign to fund the building of a “six generations school.” Some money was contributed by local citizens. They also took out a bank loan for \$2,500. Now they were unable to repay the loan. But now Mr. Bon Dan Loi had returned to Hainan for the opening of the community school in his hometown. Knowing that he was very interested in public affairs, they had asked Mr. Lim Quang to talk with him on their behalf and ask him to raise the necessary funds among Overseas Chinese from Hainan in the United

States. Mr. Lim Quang had promised to do as they asked and made an appointment. The chairman of the town people's council and the secretary of the town party committee were to meet him at his house at 7 pm and he would take them to see Mr. Bon Dan Loi. But when they turned up he told them that he was sick. He did not want to take them there. He asked me to do it in his place. Out of respect for him I felt obliged to agree.

I entered Mr. Bon Dan Loi's house first and explained why we were there. Mr. Bon Dan Loi was just getting ready to go to a concert. He heard me out and said: "Mr. Lim Quang never mentioned this matter to me. I do not know these people yet. Don't be so foolish as to listen to Mr. Lim Quang. He is very cunning."

It seemed that he was refusing to see them. I asked him, out of regard for me, at least to see them and hear what they had to say. Mr. Bon Dan Loi agreed to receive them.

They asked him for his help. When he returned to the United States, could he campaign among Overseas Chinese with roots in Hainan to contribute money to repay the loan?

At first Mr. Bon Dan Loi said that it would be very difficult. He could not do it. Afterward I talked with him again and asked him to do his best to help. He then agreed to raise a half of the total sum – that is, \$1,250. Mr. Lim Quang should undertake to raise the other half himself from his relatives. That would solve the problem.

When the chairman and the secretary learned of the result, they thanked Mr. Bon Dan Loi and also me.

"Why did Mr. Dan Loi listen to you?" they asked me.

I replied in a jocular tone: "I have a special relationship with Mr. Bon Dan Loi. Getting a few thousand dollars for you was easy enough. If you need a few tens of thousands, that should not be too difficult either."

Indeed, Mr. Bon Dan Loi soon raised \$2,750 and sent it to them. As for Mr. Lim Quang, he did nothing at all.

The next day, the chairman of the Wen Chang County People's Council and the director of the county's Overseas Chinese Department invited Mr. Dan Loi and his group to tour the county center, Wen Chang City, and the nearby Louqiangang Bay. I was also invited to come along. I sat in the back row on the minibus. At first the other passengers took no notice of me. When the minibus had gone halfway, it stopped to pick up Mr. Phan Chinh Hoa, a very wealthy businessman who had owned the Phuc Tho Duong Store in Danang and was now honorary chairman of the Los Angeles Hainan Overseas Chinese Association. As an enthusiastic donor to public works, he was well known and respected by his fellow countrymen. When he got on the minibus, he spotted me, greeted me, and introduced me to the other

passengers as a good friend of his. Then they all started to take notice of me and turned their heads to greet me.

The funniest thing was that in the row in front of me there sat a relative of mine named Han Tan Quang, a professor at Changsha University in Hunan Province who came from the same town as Mr. Bon Dan Loi. When Mr. Phan Chinh Hoa introduced me to him, he turned his head, greeted me, and apologized:

“We never met before, so I was impolite. Please forgive me.”

“There is nothing to forgive,” I replied.

When we arrived at the county center, the chairman of the county people’s council and the director of the county Overseas Chinese Department hosted a banquet for us. They paid me the honor of presenting me as a representative of the Overseas Chinese community in England. Mr. Han Tro Lang, a well-known member of the county gentry, also introduced me to everyone at the reception.

On Tuesday, the director of the Hainan Province Overseas Chinese Department and the deputy chairman of the Hainan Province People’s Council held a reception for representatives of Overseas Chinese communities from all over the world. Huong and I were also invited as representatives of the Overseas Chinese community in England. It was a great honor for us, but some people were surprised. Most jealous of them all was Mrs. Diep Lanh. When she heard that Huong and I had been invited to the reception, she openly told Sister Neo:

“No one invited you! Why go and take someone else’s seat?”

“We were invited by the province,” replied Sister Neo.

“Really?”

“Yes.”

As we waited in line to go into the reception, Mr. Kinh Quang asked me:

“Did the province really invite you?”

“Have you forgotten?” I replied. “When the central government hears that I am back in the homeland, they too will have to invite me. The province is even more obliged to do so.”

“Ah, now I remember!”

Huong and I were standing in line just behind Miss Ba Dao. She turned her head and asked me: “Are you invited too?”

I smiled and nodded.

“Ah!” she said. “I knew. After all, you are an important cadre.”

There was another incredible incident involving Mrs. Diep Lanh. When from a distance she saw Huong and me taking our places, she rushed over to our table. She looked around the table with her eyes wide open, as though she were trying to find something. Perhaps she wanted to see our name plates. It made me feel rather strange.

“What are you looking for?” I asked her.

“I’m trying to find Quynh Anh’s name plate.”

“Who is Quynh Anh?”

“She’s my niece. The province didn’t invite me, but Quynh Anh gave me her invitation card.”

I did not understand her intention. Maybe she was playing some sort of nasty game.

Some of the people who reacted in these strange ways were just surprised to see us there and did not understand why we had been invited. Others, however, were jealous. They thought that only people visiting from the United States had the right to attend the banquet. Overseas Chinese from other countries had no right to be there.

An even more incredible incident concerned Mr. Han Ky Nguyen, a younger brother of Mr. Han Nam Vien, who was visiting Hainan from Australia. When he saw me he openly said:

“You are from England. How come you were able to get so many plane tickets?”

I smiled and replied: “Plane tickets are not so very hard to get. It is no problem to buy even nine or ten tickets.”

“I know that you have visited the homeland several times already.”

“Yes, and I shall visit yet again.”

He saw the world through the eyes of a dog. He imagined that those who settled in England were very poor – far below those who settled in the United States, Canada, and Australia. How ridiculous!

Chapter 41. I visit the United States

Chien made good progress at university in England. In 1991 he received a government grant to study for one year at the University of California at Berkeley. That was a great honor for Chien and also for our family.

On September 1, 1992, I went to Los Angeles to visit Nga and her family and other relatives and friends, especially Mrs. Diep Lanh. Everyone made me feel welcome. When relatives heard that my son was studying at Berkeley they showed great respect and praised me for providing my children with such good conditions for study that one of them had got a chance to study at a famous American university and honor our ancestors.

While in Los Angeles I made daily visits to the Hainan Fellowship Club. Mr. Phan Chinh Hoa openly introduced me to everyone with the words: “Mr. Hing Quang is a Communist, but I like him best of all. He is impartial and compassionate. I have great respect for him.”

Mr. Han Than Nguyen also introduced me to everyone, saying: “When I was in Hong Kong Mr. Hing Quang helped me sell swallow’s nest. Thanks to him I made a lot of money and built a big house in the homeland.” Afterward he invited me to a restaurant to thank me.

During my visit friends old and new all made me feel welcome. Every day someone invited me to a restaurant. The people who talked with me and took care of me the most were Mr. Bon Dan Loi and Mr. Kinh Quang. Although they were both weak and elderly, they took me to see the sights and threw parties for me. I was very moved.

When Mr. Hai Quang and Mr. and Mrs. Phuong Ly in Santa Ana heard that I was in the United States, they came to collect me and took me to their home.

When Mr. Phung Du Lam, who was in his eighties, heard that I was in the country, he too was very happy. He praised me as a good and clever person.

When Mr. Diep Nang Di, who was also in his eighties, heard that I was visiting, he came to the Hainan Fellowship Club, waited to see me, and took me out to eat and talk.

Mrs. and Mr. Ngo Khon Phuc invited me to their house for a meal and to thank me for helping them in Hong Kong.

I was very moved by the warm reception I received from relatives and friends. I felt very grateful to them.

While in Los Angeles I was also fortunate enough to meet Mr. Dong Loi, who was visiting the United States from Canada. His brother, Mr. Lam Minh Nhuan, had just arrived in Los Angeles from Vietnam. Mr. Dong Loi and I had not seen one another for several years. Now we were overwhelmed by our reunion. We exchanged confidences about our situation since leaving Vietnam. I sincerely thanked Mr. Dong Loi for his past help and support. My gratitude gave him some comfort.

“In the old days,” he said, “I made friends with many people, but you were my only real friend and always will be.”

Although most of my relatives and friends treated me very well, there was one exception. Mr. Lim Quang told me that I had to spend one night at his house so that we could talk, because we had not seen one another for a long time. When he heard Mr. Hai Quang arrive in his car to take me to visit his family, he wanted to come with us. After the visit Mr. Phuong Ly took us to Mr. Lim Quang’s house. When we entered the house we saw Mrs. Diep Lanh in the kitchen (the living room, dining room, and kitchen were joined together). For some reason that I did not understand, after letting us in she just ignored us. She stayed in the kitchen and did not come out to see us. So I myself went into the kitchen to greet her. She had a very fierce and angry expression on her face.

When Mr. Lim Quang saw her attitude he felt embarrassed. He immediately went into the kitchen to talk to her. "We have guests," he told her. She reluctantly came out, greeted Mrs. and Mr. Phuong Ly, and set out cookies. Seeing the situation, Mrs. and Mr. Phuong Ly stayed only a short time and then went home. Mr. Lim Quang and I sat side by side and did not say a word.

A while later Mrs. Diep Lanh, their daughter Binh, and Binh's husband and children prepared and ate dinner. They did not ask Mr. Lim Quang or myself to join them.

Mrs. Diep Lanh's attitude gave me a really strange feeling. I did not understand what had happened to make her behave that way. Mr. Lim Quang was very embarrassed but did not know what to do.

Mrs. Diep Lanh and Binh and her family finished their dinner and went to bed without saying anything. Mr. Lim Quang was very angry but did not want to distress me, so he too kept his silence.

After Mrs. Diep Lanh had been in bed a while, Mr. Lim Quang went to the kitchen himself to make lotus seed pudding and asked me to eat with him. That was when Mr. Han Cao Nguyen dropped by. However, Mrs. Diep Lanh's attitude had upset me and I had lost my appetite, so I thanked him and declined. He understood how I felt. After a very long separation we had met again, but we were not happy. Mrs. Diep Lanh's surprising attitude had made Mr. Lim Quang lose face. He was in an awkward situation and felt ashamed in front of a cousin.

At about 10 pm Mr. Lim Quang went into the kitchen to make noodle soup. He told me that I had to eat with him. As he was my cousin and I did not want him to feel sad I made myself do so. Then we quietly went to bed.

Previously the relationship between our family and his had been very close. We had loved one another like blood relatives. We had helped them and even helped Mrs. Diep Lanh's relatives. But now circumstances had changed, like everything in this world. Mrs. Diep Lanh had also changed. I knew that Mr. Lim Quang was suffering inside. He had been severely rebuked by her. I did not know what to tell him to make him feel better.

The next morning, just after I got up, I saw Mr. Lim Quang in the kitchen cooking rice soup for our breakfast and preparing a lunch box for his daughter Binh to take to work. After breakfast he took me to the Hainan Fellowship Club.

Although Nga and Hoa were very busy during my visit, they took time off to show me Hollywood, Disney World, the Taiwan Buddha Pagoda, and many other interesting places. My wishes were fulfilled and I was happy and enthusiastic.

Before going to America I had been very worried and hesitant about my trip. I was afraid that some people might be prejudiced against me, treat me badly, or even harass me. In reality, everyone (with the sole exception of Mrs. Diep Lanh) liked and respected me. No one was prejudiced against me.

The man in charge of the Hainan Fellowship Club, Mr. Phu, repeatedly urged me to apply to settle in the United States so that I could work at the club with him. I thanked him and all my relatives for their kindness and wished them everlasting health and good luck.

During my visit Mr. Bon Dan Loi urged me to return to Vietnam with a few of my children to do business there. That would be better than staying in England and working for other people. "I have a multistory house at 369 Hong Bang Street in Cholon," he told me. "I have been offered 300 taels of gold for it, but I do not want to sell it because my children are in America and have already established a business there. If you would like to go and do business in Cholon, you can use that house rent-free."

"Wait until I visit Vietnam to assess the situation there," I replied. "I'll get back to you."

He told me to meet him in Saigon to discuss the matter in April. However, I went to Vietnam in March and returned to England in April. So I missed him. I had no interest in doing business in Vietnam, because in my heart I still believed in the Vietnamese Revolution. I did not bring the matter up again.

Chapter 42. I visit Vietnam

On February 21, 1992, after a month in Los Angeles, I returned to England to rest. On March 16 I set off again – to Vietnam, to visit my mother, my two sisters and their families, other relatives, and friends.

When I arrived at Tan Son Nhat Airport, my sister Hanh and her children, my cousin Kham, my sister Bon's children, and my nephew Ngo were there to welcome me. It had been over ten years since we had seen one another.

My sister Hanh was so impatient that when she saw a tall man emerge from the plane she rushed over to him, seized hold of his hand, and cried out: "Brother Hai! Brother Hai!" The man walked along with her for a short distance, then he smiled and said: "I am not your brother Hai. Your brother Hai is over there." Still Hanh took no notice. Only when her son Dung spotted me and yelled: "Uncle Hai is here!" did she realize that she had mistaken the identity of that man. It was very funny.

I went to Hanh's house to rest. I was very anxious to get to Dap Da as soon as possible to see my mother, other relatives, and friends, but I had to wait two days for my niece Tuyet's husband Ha to take us there in his van. At last we left for Dap Da.

In the van I sat next to Mrs. Diep Lan Anh, because she was old and weak and needed someone to take care of her. By the time we reached Nha Trang she was very tired. I was very worried that something might happen. That would lead

to many complications. Fortunately, two of her nieces had met her at the airport and were with us, so I asked them to take care of her. She arrived in Dap Da safe and sound.

After a night and a day on the road we reached Dap Da on March 19 at about 10 pm. There was an electricity blackout at the time and it was pitch black. My mother heard us arrive and came out of the house carrying a paraffin lamp with a very dim light. My sister Bon and a lot of neighbors came out with her to greet me. When I got off the van everyone was very happy. The neighbors kidded my mother: “Brother Hai isn’t here yet!”

Mother touched my ears and said: “Yes, it really is him!” Then she pulled me into the house. At that moment the electric light suddenly came back on. Mother examined me from head to toe. It was over ten years since we had seen one another. Now we were overwhelmed by our reunion. Mother’s eyes filled with tears. She cried for a long time before she could start the conversation. She asked me to tell her in detail about the situation of everyone in the family. Then she cried again and said: “It’s lucky that you left. Had you remained, you would have had a hard and pitiable life.”

I jokingly asked: “What, are they still insulting us?”

“Not now.”

I thought that she might be hard of hearing and was unsure whether she had heard me right, so I asked again.

“It’s true, they are no longer insulting us.”

I saw that mother was still healthy. Her vision was good. She could still draw a thread through a needle. Her gait was quick and firm. My sisters and brothers-in-law were also in good health. Their life in general was secure for the time being. I was happy for them and felt at peace.

When I had left Vietnam I was thin, my neck was long like a stork’s, and only my brown skin covered my bones. Now, on my return, I was plump, my skin was white, and I looked healthy. Some people were unable to recognize me. They asked Mrs. Diep Lan Anh: “Is he really Mr. Hing Quang?” It was very funny.

The very next day the An Nhon District Police delivered a notice summoning me and Mrs. Diep Lan Anh to the police station. I was surprised. I did not know what sort of game they wanted to play. When we entered the station we were greeted by two police officers. As they did not introduce themselves, I did not know their rank. Their demeanor was friendly. They invited us to sit down and offered us tea. Then they asked us the usual questions: “On what boat did you leave the country? What did you do before you left? Do you have a job now?”

At first they called me “uncle.” But when they learned that I had gone to Hanoi with my family at the end of 1954, worked at the Ministry of Foreign Trade

and Ministry of Foreign Affairs, returned to the South in 1975, worked at the Nghia Binh Import-Export Company, and was now retired, they changed their tone and started to call me “elder.”

They suggested that I might have returned earlier had I not heard alarming rumors. I said: “I did not return earlier because I did not have the money.”

Then they asked me to show them my passport. My passport was in a large leather holder with many pockets. One of the police officers used his finger to check all the pockets. Perhaps he hoped to find foreign currency, but there was nothing there. It was really funny, but also pitiable.

When they had finished they said: “We invited you today to ask a few questions. That is all. You are free to go.”

We thanked them and set off for home. They followed us to the doorsteps. I offered them a big wad of Vietnamese banknotes for them to treat themselves to some refreshments, but they dared not take the gift even though I had offered it informally.

On the same day I received from the An Nhon District Committee for the Protection, Care, and Education of Young Children a three-page printed letter entreating Overseas Vietnamese to open their hearts and help homeless children who had no one to look after them. The next day Mr. Nguyen Van Tien, chairman of the that committee, showed up in person at my door to discuss the matter with me. He appealed to my compassion for children. I donated 500,000 dong. He was very happy and thanked me.

The day after my arrival many friends came to visit me. Some hugged me and kissed my cheeks for as long as they could. Some had even come long distances to see me face to face. They wanted to know about my present situation. Among them was Mr. Tran Dung, director of the Nghia Binh Import-Export Company. When he heard that I was visiting, he came to meet me from Canh Hang District. He held me tight and kissed me on the cheeks for a very long time. He wanted to show me his friendship and sincerity. I was surprised and moved to tears. I recollected his attitude when the South had just been liberated and he returned to take up his post as company director. The contrast between that time and this was like that between Hell and Heaven.

One day there was an engagement party for my niece Van, daughter of my sister Hanh. I was upstairs welcoming guests when a friend named Ngo Lang arrived. He came straight upstairs to look for me. When he saw me he was overwhelmed. Forgetting to greet the guests surrounding me, he came up to me really fast and hugged me. He was very happy and moved. I invited him to sit down and have some tea, but he just blurted out: “Well, I heard people say bad

things about you and was very worried. Now that I have seen you face to face, I am happy and at peace.”

I asked him about his health, his family, and what he was now doing. He told me that he had opened a herbal medicine store and was doing quite well. I was very happy for him. I asked him to stay and have dinner with us. He thanked me and said: “I have done what I set out to do. I am satisfied. I still have other things to do.”

He invited me to come to his house and visit his family, but I was preparing to go to Saigon and did not have time to spare. I thanked him for his concern, wished him and his family everlasting health and good fortune, and promised to see him again on my next visit.

I visited relatives, friends, and neighbors – everyone, rich and poor alike. Dap Da is where I was born and raised. I had always been on good terms with the older people and with people of my own age. They had always been warm and friendly toward me.

One good friend of mine, a retired army officer, told me: “The party and government created a lot of confusion. They made mistakes and failed to correct them. What do they say now after causing so much suffering? Nothing! I am fed up with them.”

Mr. Nguyen Nhi, chairman of the Dap Da People’s Council, said to me: “When you left Vietnam some cadres at the county level criticized you and said incorrect things about you. But there were also many who defended you. I told your critics: ‘Mr. Quang left the country with the permission of the party and government. He did not “escape.” Don’t say incorrect things about him.’ We were all aware of your contributions to the Vietnamese Revolution. I myself saw many photos of you.”

We do not blame those local people who criticized us for leaving the country. We understand that they felt forced to do it by a brutal regime that they dared not defy.

One of those I visited was Mr. Lam Ba, an old friend and comrade from Dap Da. He was a cadre who had gone to the North and returned. Now he was unemployed, old, and sick. He had just returned to the South when the county assigned him and his wife as maintenance workers at Dap Da Market. The work was heavy, the wages low. They lived a hard life. Now the former cadre swept the marketplace. People looked down on him and ridiculed him behind his back. It made the party and government lose face. He knew how people regarded him, but that was his life and he accepted it. Now he was old and weak. His job was also gone. The couple lay in bed before my eyes – sick, hungry, and tired. It was a pitiful sight.

When I called in on him, he was moved to tears. He cried out loud and lamented: “Here is Lam Ba, back from the North for over ten years already and no one has ever come to visit me yet. I was a lower-ranking cadre and you were a higher-ranking cadre. Now you are an Overseas Vietnamese, but you still care about me and come to see me. I am so grateful.”

Before leaving I gave Mr. Lam Ba and his wife some money. She was so happy. He was speechless. His eyes filled with tears. He could say only: “Thank you, thank you.” Now they had some money to buy rice. They would be less hungry and maybe they would be able to walk around.

The next day Mr. Lam Ba’s wife came to talk to my sister Hanh. “Not long ago,” she told her, “my husband and I were sick. We had no food, we could not sit up, we could only lie shivering in bed. Luckily for us, yesterday an Overseas Vietnamese named Mr. Quang paid us a visit and gave us some money to buy rice to eat. Today we can walk around. I’m going to buy some sweet potatoes, boil and sell them, and make some money to buy more rice. We’ll be able to live. It’s so good!”

“He’s my brother Hai,” said Hanh.

Then she thanked sister Hanh as well.

Another person I visited was a distant relative named Suu. His family was big and poor. He did not even have enough money to buy long pants to wear. The whole year round he wore only shorts and a T-shirt.

Mr. Suu’s wife was in very poor health. Her blood pressure was so high as to endanger her life. I gave her some money to buy medicine, but soon after that she passed away. The family was penniless. I gave Mr. Suu money to buy a coffin and cover the funeral expenses. When the local people heard about it, they praised me as a good person wherever I went.

Late one afternoon, a woman about 93 years old showed up at my sister Hanh’s house. Her face expressed sincerity and good nature. She told Hanh: “A vendor gave me ten boiled duck-embryo eggs to sell. If I can sell them I shall have money to buy some rice to eat, but since this morning I have sold only two eggs and made only 200 dong profit. With that I have bought a bowl of rice. Now I am begging people for a glass of cold water to add to the rice so that I can cook and eat it and not go hungry.”

At that point I happened to drop in at sister Hanh’s house. The woman saw me and asked Hanh: “Who is he?”

“This is my brother Hai,” replied Hanh. “He is visiting from Saigon.”

Then she asked Hanh and me to buy some of her boiled duck-embryo eggs. We bought three eggs. She was so happy! She looked me over from head to toe and said: “At the market I heard talk of a very good Overseas Vietnamese who helping the poor. Mr. Suu’s wife was very lucky! She died penniless but he paid to

buy her a coffin. What luck, eh? Everyone was praising him. I'd like to meet him myself and ask him to give me some money, if that would be appropriate."

While she was speaking, a friend of Hanh's happened to come by. She pointed her finger at me and told her: "This is the man!"

The old woman was delighted to hear it and asked me: "Can you please give me some money?"

I jokingly replied: "How much do you want?"

"Can you give me 2,000 dong?"

Still in a joking tone, I asked: "Do you mind if I make that 5,000?"

At that she was so happy that she started dancing. "Not at all, not at all!" she exclaimed. "I heard people say that you only give 5,000 and no less. I thank you from the bottom of my heart."

I gave her the 5,000 dong and said: "You haven't eaten dinner yet tonight. Now you can buy two bowls of rice noodles to eat and with the rest of the money you can buy tea to drink, go home, and relax."

"I dare not eat rice noodles," she replied. "I'll use these 5,000 dong to buy sweet potatoes. I'll boil and sell them and with the profit I can buy rice to eat."

There was an old man in the district to whom I gave 6,000 dong, again jokingly inviting him to eat a bowl of rice noodles and then go home for a nap. He too said: "I dare not eat rice noodles. With these 6,000 dong I'll buy three kilograms of rice. That will make me enough rice soup to last a month."

From my many visits I learned that while a small section of the population enjoyed high incomes the majority of workers, office employees, retired people, and veterans lived a hard and miserable life – even harder and more miserable than before 1979. This situation saddened me greatly. I only regretted that I did not have more money to help the destitute people of the district. But at least I was able to help them a little.

I also visited some Overseas Chinese relatives and friends who had stayed behind. I wanted to learn from them how the anti-Chinese campaign of the Vietnamese government had developed after 1979. They told me that it had become more ruthless and cunning. The Overseas Chinese cadres who had remained in Vietnam were mistreated in all sorts of mean and cruel ways.

One such cadre was Mr. Au Quynh Phien. He was from a wealthy family. He joined the Vietnamese Revolution in 1948 during the Anti-French Resistance War. He became a member of the Communist Party and of the Overseas Chinese Youth Militia. He worked as an underground propagandist and organizer. As Mr. Phien had stomach problems, he traveled to Nha Trang for treatment and to visit his relatives, but was arrested and tortured by the French. After a year in jail he was released.

After the French withdrew from Vietnam Mr. Phien was arrested again by the Ngo Dinh Diem regime. Also arrested were my son-in-law's brother Mr. Au Quynh Hoa and Mr. Chau Vinh. All three were tortured half to death and then held at a big prison under truly atrocious conditions. Despite this, they remained loyal to the revolution and determined to fight to the end. They were released at the start of the war with America. Mr. Phien came home, opened a business, and continued his underground activities. Mr. Chau Vinh also came home, but he was sick and died soon after. Mr. Au Quynh Hoa had the bad luck to be killed in a car accident.

In 1975 the South was liberated and Vietnam united. Mr. Phien was assigned to work at the Qui Nhon Means and Materials Company. Soon after liberation the party and government conducted a campaign for the reform of private business and industry. Drawing no distinction between friends and enemies, they struck out at anyone who had money. Even Mr. Phien could not evade this campaign.

The official slogan at this time was: "Fight your enemies first, then fight your friends." These were the very words used by Mr. To Dinh, a deputy chairman of the People's Council of Nghia Binh Province and head of the campaign in the province, speaking to a group of leading provincial cadres.

Poor Mr. Phien! All the property accumulated by his sweat and tears over twenty years was now confiscated by the government – three gasoline stations, a timber processing firm, a chemical fertilizer factory, a two-story house, and 100,000 new dong in the bank. Mr. Phien was devastated. He could not say a word. His wife pleaded with him to take her and their children out of the country and start a new life abroad. In his heart, however, Mr. Phien remained loyal to the party and the revolution. He did not want to leave. He stayed on and suffered all sorts of mistreatment.

When I went to visit Mr. Phien he was overwhelmed. His first words to me were that he had made a big mistake. "I was too immature, too superstitious, so I was tricked, mistreated, and shamed. I am full of regret. After 1979 the anti-China and anti-Chinese campaign of the Vietnamese party and government day by day became more cunning and ruthless. After you left, hoping to win the trust of the party and government, I stood up and fiercely criticized you. I was surprised to discover that I had failed to win their trust. The leaders of my party organization repeatedly urged me to request permission to withdraw from the party. I refused. I told them: 'I have contributed a great deal to the Vietnamese Revolution. I have devoted my life to the cause and offered my property to the party and government. I have never done anything wrong. So I shall not withdraw voluntarily from the party.' I was adamant. Then they tried sweet talk. They assigned me to Cu Mong Hill to manage the cattle ranch there. Still loyal to the party and the revolution, I accepted the assignment as a challenge. I thought that the party and government were showing their trust in me. I worked at the ranch for exactly seven years. I

tended cattle and endured many hardships – more than I can recount. At last I could bear it no longer. I finally woke up. I realized that this was a cruel and cunning means by which the party and government sought to shame and torment me. I knew that they had lied to me and deceived me. I was extremely angry. Without further hesitation I asked to withdraw from the party. The leaders of my party organization must have been very happy. After all those years they had finally achieved their goal. They accepted my request and granted it immediately. That was it.

“After a decades-long political career I went home a nobody. The leading comrades ‘understood.’ They had not completely lost their conscience. They pretended to be naïve and allowed me to retire. My monthly pension is 50,000 dong.” (At that time one kilogram of rice cost 2,000 dong.)

I pitied and sympathized with Mr. Phien with all my heart. He had devoted his whole life to the Vietnamese Revolution and faced danger, imprisonment, torture, and suffering without wavering in his determination to struggle. And this was the result!

Mrs. Phien was heartbroken, discouraged, and pessimistic. Many times she had begged her husband to take the family out of Vietnam, but he remained adamant. She had to bite her lip and clench her teeth. Eventually she left her husband and two sons behind in Vietnam and took her two daughters to escape by boat. However, only one of the daughters survived. According to a letter that she sent her uncle (Mr. Phien’s brother Mr. Ba Ta), who was living in China at the time, their boat had landed on an island in Malaya where her sister, being hungry, climbed a fruit tree and fell to her death while her mother died of starvation. I know of this letter because when I met Mr. Ba Ta in China he asked me to translate it into Chinese for him. Mr. Phien, however, told me a different story. According to him, pirates had robbed the boat and killed them. In any case, the surviving daughter reached Hong Kong and was accepted for settlement in the United States.

Mr. Phien’s account moved me to tears. Although bad luck played a role in the deaths of his wife and daughter, the underlying cause was the anti-China and anti-Chinese policy of the Vietnamese party and government.

I paid a visit to Mrs. Han Nguyet Hoa, the widow of Mr. Ngo Khon Dao. She and her children told me the terrible story of their family. Mr. Khon Dao was also a wealthy man. He had joined the Vietnamese Revolution at a young age. In 1949 he became a member of the Communist Party of Indochina. In 1955 his whole family went to the North. Thanks to his contribution to the revolution and also to his personal connections, the family received special treatment from the government. He and his wife worked at one of Hanoi’s gasoline stations for nearly

a year before retiring on lifelong pensions. Their two children were sent abroad by the government for training.

In 1979, when the party and government were conducting their anti-China and anti-Chinese policy, they chose Mr. Khon Dao to go on Qui Nhon Television to insult China. After 1979 his own family fell victim to that policy.

His eldest son, Mr. Ngo Da Ky had previously worked at the Hanoi General Machinery Factory, which actually produced weapons and ammunition with Russian assistance. After the South was liberated he was reassigned to work in Saigon. One day, while at work, he suddenly died of some unknown cause. By the time an ambulance had taken him to the hospital, his body had turned black. His family requested the authorities to arrange a post mortem to determine the cause of death, but some well-meaning people advised them to drop the matter:

“He is already dead. What good will it do? Don’t be stupid! Or else he won’t be the only one who dies.”

Indeed, his son also died soon after him.

Mr. Khon Dao’s second son, Mr. Ta, was a correspondent for the army radio. During the American war he fought at the front and was gravely wounded, but was rescued and brought to the rear for treatment. When the border war with China broke out, he again went to fight. Unfortunately, he lost contact with his unit. Suspecting that he had defected, the army stopped paying his salary to his wife. For several months his wife received no news of him and received no money. She and their children had a hard time. After many people had intervened on his behalf, the army resumed paying his salary to his wife. When the border war ended, it was discovered that he had again been gravely wounded and sent to Hanoi for treatment. He died soon after.

Mr. Khon Dao had a third son named Da Thuy. The government had sent him to Romania to learn how to drive diesel trains. After his return he drove trains. He was a good and hard worker. In 1979 he was forbidden to continue driving trains. As he had been trained abroad, however, the Railways Ministry reconsidered and allowed him to drive a freight train carrying stone from the Cau Ganh Quarry to Qui Nhon. This helped him not to get angry at the government. Da Thuy told me that recently the government had rectified its errors. He had been reassigned to Dieu Tri Station, where he was in charge of scheduling trains.

The husband of Mr. Khon Dao’s second daughter was the son of Mr. Nam Sanh, who used to live in Bong Son and now lived in Qui Nhon. In 1954 the South Midlands branch of the United Association of Overseas Chinese had sent him to the North for an education. He went through medical school, qualified as a physician, and was assigned to the war zone in the South, where he worked over ten years as an army doctor. As he had worked hard and was a good doctor, the government was going to send him to Hungary as a research fellow. Everything

was prepared. He had been to Hanoi to study Hungarian and was waiting to go to Hungary. Then suddenly the leadership issued an instruction that he was not to go abroad and must leave Hanoi immediately. He was sent to Quang Ngai to “keep safe,” even though his parents, wife, and children were all in Qui Nhon.

Mr. Khon Dao’s third daughter, Miss Xuan, was a member of the Youth Volunteer Service. The Ministry of Education had sent her to a mountainous area in Ba To, Quang Ngai Province to teach people from the ethnic minorities. Miss Xuan was good and hardworking, but many years passed and she was never admitted to the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth League. Worst of all, she was engaged to an ethnic Vietnamese. They went to the Qui Nhon City People’s Council to apply for a marriage license, but the council cadre disapproved of the match. Miss Xuan was Chinese; she could not marry a Vietnamese. Their happiness was destroyed.

Mr. Khon Dao’s youngest son Hung had been working at the printing press in Qui Nhon when he was dismissed with no reason given. He remained unemployed until 1997, when he went to Pleiku to grow coffee on a private plantation.

Mr. Khon Dao was constantly subjected to heavy criticism. He was sad, anxious, and tired of living. He did not want to eat or sleep. Reflecting on all that had happened, he could not hold back his tears. He had suffered from high blood pressure for a long time. One day, while watching TV with his wife and children, he suddenly fell out of his chair and died. What a miserable way to bid farewell to his family! He had told his wife and children that as his body was big there was no need to buy a coffin for him. It would be good enough to wrap him up and bury him in a jute mat. Apart from that, he left no will.

Listening to Mrs. Han Nguyet Hoa’s heart-rending tale, I was moved to tears and could not say a word. I gave her some money, comforted her, said goodbye to her and her children, and returned home. I felt grief and pity for Mr. Khon Dao, a lifelong communist devoted to the Vietnamese Revolution who came to such a tragic end.

I also paid a visit to Mrs. Tran Kim Cuc, the widow of Mr. Thai Hieu An. He had joined the Vietnamese Revolution long ago. He and his wife went to the North in 1955. They had two sons. In 1960 he was sent back to the South on a secret mission, but was soon killed by the enemy.

After Vietnam was united Mrs. Cuc took her sons back to Qui Nhon. She worked at the City Trade Department. The boys attended school. In 1979 she was dismissed and her children were no longer allowed to go to school. Following many appeals, the authorities agreed to allow one son to return to school, but the other had to stay home. They said: “It is only because Mr. Thai Hieu An was a

martyr that we have reconsidered and allowed one son to attend school. Otherwise neither would be allowed to attend.”

I felt sorry for them. Mr. Thai Hieu An had been loyal to the party and the revolution with all his heart. He had sacrificed his precious life to the cause. And yet his wife and children were shunned. His wife was unemployed and his children had been expelled from school.

“One of our sons finished school,” said Mrs. Cuc, “but he has no job. All day long he wanders the streets.” She had taken in someone’s paintings to sell on commission, but no one wanted to buy them. She had thrown them in a corner and refused to take any more. Her family had a very hard life.

I went to see Mr. Tran Tiep Kham. He too had joined the party and the revolution long ago. In 1955 he and his wife Mrs. Thanh went to the North, where they both worked at the Marine Products Import-Export Company in Haiphong. He was a subordinate of Mr. Dinh Trac. She was the company’s telephone operator. Through her negligence she offended Mr. Dinh Trac, who took revenge on the couple by sending them far away from Haiphong under the guise of evacuation. After the South was liberated they and their children came to Qui Nhon. Mrs. Thanh obtained work at the Qui Nhon Clothing Company. Mr. Kham repeatedly applied to work at the Nghia Binh Import-Export Company, but each time Mr. Dinh Trac found a way to intervene and block his appointment.

Mr. Kham finally obtained work at the Qui Nhon Trade Department. He was assigned to the management of the Qui Nhon Market. His job was to arrest small traders who were selling fish or meat without a permit. I observed that this was a really dangerous job.

“I know,” he said. “This was a job to be avoided at all costs. But I had to take it. No other job was available to me. Whenever I stepped into the marketplace, the first thing I did was to shout out: ‘Anyone selling fish or meat without a permit report to me immediately for arrest!’ They all heard me and ran away.”

In 1979 the couple were dismissed from their jobs and their children were expelled from school. Due to unemployment the family had a very hard life. Mr. Kham distilled liquor illegally at home and his wife mixed it with medicinal herbs for sale. His oldest son salted turnips to sell to laborers, cart pullers, and rickshaw drivers to eat with their lunch. The second son sat in front of the house repairing ballpoint pens, cigarette lighters, locks, and other small items, but he fell very sick and they could not afford to have him treated. Soon he was dead. A real tragedy!

Mr. Kham told me: “Once I secretly listened to a foreign radio station. Mr. Tran Tu Lap knew about it and reported it to the police. I was arrested and sent to a re-education camp for a week.”

Mr. Tran Tu Lap and Mr. Kham came from the same village and were good friends. Hoping to win the favor of the authorities, Mr. Lap had no qualms about informing on Mr. Kham and sold his soul for a trifle. He deserved to be mocked!

I visited my nephew Lam Dao Ngo and his family. He worked at the Second Saigon Dredger Company under the Ministry of Water Resources and Hydraulic Works. As Ngo was a good worker, he was promoted to director of the company. He had two disabled children with muscular dystrophy. They could sit up but not walk. I felt really sorry for them.

In 1979 Ngo, his father, and their families received permission to leave Vietnam. His father wanted the two families to leave together, but in his heart Ngo was loyal to the party and the revolution. Not only did he refuse to leave, but he told his father that leaving was the same as going into exile. Kim Anh and I advised him many times to leave with his father, but he paid no heed. Eventually he told us: "You go your way, I shall go mine."

So Ngo, his wife, and their children remained in Vietnam.

During my stay I made two visits to Ngo and his family. He told me what had happened to them. After 1979 he and his wife were forced out of their jobs. The leading cadres played many cruel and dirty tricks against their family. Even though the weather in Saigon is very hot all year round, averaging about 35° C., they cut off the family's electricity and water supply. Their children were in torment. They could not bear it. Sometimes they even fainted in the heat.

Ngo concluded: "I bitterly regretted not listening to my father and to you. Instead I stayed behind and suffered hardship and disgrace."

I also visited some old friends who were now retired. They had a hard life. Their monthly pension was 50,000 dong – equivalent at that time to US \$3.50, enough to buy only 20 kilograms of rice.

I happened to be in Vietnam at the time of the Festival for Tending Graves. I went to clean my father's grave. I also invited relatives and friends over for an intimate meal with me to demonstrate my true feelings for them. Many people came. The atmosphere was very friendly and happy.

Before I left for Saigon the Dap Da party organization held a meeting and sent Mr. Tu Hieu, secretary of the Dap Da Town Party Committee, to see me. He said: "The town committee of the Communist Party has sent me in the name of the people and party members of Dap Da to thank you for coming to visit us and for your warmth and sincerity. People told me to convey to you their sincere praise. They said that you are a good man who has remained loyal despite the many difficulties you have experienced. You are truly a rare and precious person."

I was very glad to hear his words. My mother and sisters were greatly comforted.

Before leaving Dap Da, I presented the town committee of the National Front with a donation of 300,000 dong for them to buy some gifts for sick veterans. They sincerely thanked me.

During my stay, my sister Hanh told me: “After your family left the country, the Qui Nhon City People’s Council found many ways to cause trouble for Phuc and her husband Duong. First they confiscated their house in Qui Nhon. They said: ‘This house belongs to Mr. Han Hung Quang. Now that he has left Vietnam, the government definitely has the right to confiscate it.’ Luckily, Phuc was officially registered as the house’s owner. You were registered only as a temporary resident, so they had no right to confiscate the house. But they still found a way to make trouble. They said that as Phuc and her husband had allowed Chinese to live in their house and had direct contact with Chinese her husband must be kept under surveillance and report at the police station every day at a certain time. That went on for several years. It was a real headache. They could not work or eat properly.

“Duong’s presence at the police station annoyed a leading police official there. One day this official asked Duong: ‘Why do you come here every day?’ Duong replied: ‘I was told to come here every day. I don’t know why.’ The official then asked his colleagues: ‘Why did you tell this man to come here every day?’ They were at a loss for a proper answer and made some vague remark. Then the official got very angry and said: ‘Tell this man to stop coming here to bother us and waste our time!’”

So from then on Duong did not have to report at the police station. What luck!

Sister Hanh continued: “After you left, people from the local government came twice more to check and inventory my goods. They confiscated a lot of my merchandise and furniture. There was also someone who reported to the local government that two of my children had escaped over the border. The People’s Council summoned Duc Hanh [her husband] to their office for a talk. He was very scared, so I told him not to worry, I would go instead.

“The council officials asked me: ‘We heard that two of your children had escaped over the border. Is that true?’ I replied: ‘I had two children registered to go out of the country with their uncle to study. They did not escape over the border.’ They said nothing more.”

The local government had Mr. Duc Hanh’s house and business checked and inventoried several times. His losses were heavy and his two sons were far away. He missed them terribly. His mental health was affected. He could not eat or sleep properly. He lost interest in daily activities. He was pessimistic and tired of living.

He spent money all day. He developed lung cancer. He went for treatment: the doctors did all they could for him, but his cancer could not be cured and he passed away. Such a pity!

Sister Hanh told me that she herself had also come under heavy criticism. After her husband died, his older and younger sisters fought for his estate. They used many cunning tricks to harm her and incited her children to quarrel with her. It was a very nasty fight. Her children told her to compile a clear list of family possessions and give the list to them. They took over her business and her accounts. Each day they wrote down how much money they had given her to go to the market and buy food for the family. They did not allow her to inquire into the family business.

Mr. Duc Hanh's nieces and nephews also conspired to make trouble for her. They even pretended to be drunk and threatened her with a knife.

It takes courage to bear such things. Hanh just clenched her teeth and endured all these hardships and difficulties. My sympathy for my sister was mixed with admiration for her courageous spirit. My heart went out to her. All her life she had worked hard for her husband and children. Now her in-laws and children were mistreating her. Fortunately, she was blessed with a full heart and a strong mind, so she managed to avoid many of the bad things that might have happened.

Sister Hanh continued: "After you left, our brother-in-law Mr. Bon Kham coveted your house. So he often made trouble for me. He even beat me, yelling that it was his wife's ancestral home and he had a right to part of it."

My mother added: "You said that the house would belong to whoever takes care of me. No one from the Bon family ever came to take care of me. Only my granddaughter Thu came and took care of me. So you decided that Thu would inherit the house. When Mrs. and Mr. Bon heard that, they were very angry. They have often made trouble for her, beaten her, and insulted her and her children. Now I have officially transferred ownership of the house to Thu. But Mrs. and Mr. Bon have still not accepted it. Now that you are here, please write a note for Thu stating that you have given this house to her, so that there will be no further complications."

I said: "There is no need for any note. Not only will a note not help: it may cause more problems. Because it will be written by someone who has left the country the government will confiscate it. Anyway, the house is already registered in Thu's name. The authorities have accepted her as the owner. No one can fight for the house any more. Should Mr. Bon again dispute her ownership, you, Hanh, should tell him right out: 'This house was bought by Mr. Hai for our mother to live in. It is not your ancestral home. No one has a right to claim it. Even you can do nothing about it.'"

Later Thu told me: “Grandma has already transferred ownership of the house to me. If you and your family come back, then I’ll return it to you.”

I told her: “We have already settled in England. We have no plans to return. Even if later we do return, we’ll find another house near our work. Don’t worry, Thu.”

So the problem of the house was solved. There was no more fighting for the house between the two sisters and their families.

I had already spent three weeks in Vietnam. I said goodbye to my mother and to all my relatives and friends. On April 10 I went to Saigon to prepare for my return to England.

When I reached Saigon, I immediately went to visit Mr. Ngo Van Chuong, also called Elder Tu Chuong, and his family. When he saw me he was so overwhelmed that he ran to me and held me tight for a long time. We were so happy to meet again after almost twenty years. He cried and was unable to speak for a while. He showed great concern for us, asking detailed questions about the health and work situation of each member of our family.

Elder Tu Chuong was already over ninety years old, but he as well as his wife were still in excellent health. I wished them good health and good fortune with all my heart. Later he came to sister Hanh’s Saigon house, greeted us very warmly, and invited her, her children, and myself to the big Hai An Hotel for a meal. As it was only a few hours before my departure for England, he had his chauffeur drive him to sister Hanh’s house and take us to Tan Son Nhat Airport so that he could see me off. Before saying goodbye he held me tight and cried loudly. He loved me so much and did not want to part from me. I was very moved. I too cried and could not say a word. I sincerely thanked him, urged him to try to stay in good health, and promised to visit him again. His image will always remain engraved in my heart.

It had already been thirteen years since I last saw my meek good-hearted mother and my other relatives. Now I had visited Vietnam and seen them again. I was relieved to discover that they were in good health and – at least for the time being – secure. I felt happy and at peace. Mother had seen me and learned about our family situation abroad. She felt reassured. Now that I had to part from her she was sad and cried. I too cried, but could only comfort her. I told her: “Don’t be sad. Your grandchildren and I will often return to visit you.”

Chapter 43. Again to Vietnam

I left on my second visit to Vietnam on April 8, 1996 and arrived at Tan Son Nhat Airport the next day. My sister Hanh and her children, sister Bon’s children, and

Tho, son of Mr. Xai Quach, were at the airport to meet me. They were very happy to see me. I went to sister Hanh's house to rest. The next day I went to visit Elder Tu Chuong, but he had moved away. I told his relatives to let him know that I had come to see him.

On the third day sister Hanh and her children drove me to Dap Da. Four years had passed since my last visit. I was reunited with my mother, sisters, brother-in-law, nieces, and nephews. I was overwhelmed! When my mother saw me she cried out with joy. Her eyes filled with tears. She held me tight and kissed me from head to toe and all over my face and hands like a baby. I was very moved by her love. I was glad to see that my mother was still as healthy as she had been on my first visit. Her gait was sturdy. Most of my relatives were in good health, the businesses of my nieces and nephews were doing well, and their children were making good progress at school. I felt at peace.

After I had been in Dap Da for three days, Elder Tu Chuong telephoned me from Saigon. "First," he said, "let me send my comrade and best friend my warmest welcome." I sincerely thanked him. Then he asked me to let him know when I intended to return to Saigon, so that his chauffeur could bring him in his jeep to Dap Da to fetch me.

His enthusiastic offer put me in a very embarrassing position. If I declined, he might scold me and say I was being unreasonable. If I accepted, I would feel very uneasy. He was over ninety years old, it was a long journey (600 kilometers) over bad roads, and the weather was very hot (35--37° C.). I worried that the journey to Dap Da and then back to Saigon would be a miserable ordeal for him. If something were to happen it would cause a lot of trouble. So I tried many ways of declining his offer, but he was very determined to come and fetch me. Finally he said: "It will give me a chance to tour Qui Nhon. I've never been to Qui Nhon before." At that I gave in and promised to give him five days' advance notice of the date I wanted to leave for Saigon.

A few days later he called again and urged me to go to Saigon earlier, so that he could take me to visit some places. I sincerely thanked him and told him the truth: my elderly mother had not seen me for a long time, so on this visit I wanted to stay with her longer and give her more happiness. He agreed.

On May 13 I called Elder Tu Chuong and told him that I would like to leave for Saigon on May 18. He replied: "I am sincerely sorry, but the 17th is my mother's memorial day and I'll be very busy with guests. So I won't be able to go to Qui Nhon. I hope you understand. If you could have come a few days earlier, I would have been able to go to Qui Nhon to fetch you and you could have celebrated my mother's memorial day with us. Or I could come and fetch you a few days later."

I was glad to hear that, because now I had a reason to decline his offer.

“Thank you,” I said. “Please forgive me for not coming to Saigon earlier to celebrate your mother’s memorial day with you. I am truly sorry. I cannot wait and go later because I have to buy a plane ticket for my nephew’s wife.”

So he had no choice but to accept that he would not be coming to Dap Da to fetch me. What luck!

I also told him that I was going to depart from Qui Nhon Airport early on the morning of May 18.

On this visit I spent two whole months in Dap Da, so I had plenty of time to talk with my mother. At first she was very happy and enthusiastic. She ate and slept well and talked nonstop about her life. She reminisced about the day she had married my father and the day he died, leaving her behind with three children. She had just turned 37. She had remained a widow, earning money as a trader. She went places to buy goods, brought them home to sell, and used the proceeds to raise her children to be useful people. Then I left for the North and did not return home until the South was liberated and the country united. And then it was not long before the situation changed and I had to leave her again to start a new life abroad.

Her memory was good. She told her story clearly and in detail, though she was easily affected by emotion. Sometimes her eyes filled with tears. Sometimes she cried loudly, especially when she knew that I would soon be leaving for England. She did not want to let go of me. I too was very moved. My heart ached and I could not hold back my tears.

I asked her: “How do you feel now?” She answered: “Now my life is full. I am very happy. I am very old. I belong with the people of ancient times. Soon I shall rejoin your father. The only thing that saddens me is that I have many grandchildren and great-grandchildren who live far away and I won’t be able to see them before I die.”

Again she cried, and I cried too, but I had nothing more to say. I could only comfort her and urge her not to be sad and to stay healthy so that her children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren could often come to visit her. She nodded her head, but inside she was still very sad and reluctant to let me go.

My talks with my mother gave me a deep understanding of her. She had had a hard life, both bitter and sweet, but she remained full of optimism and love of life. She cared about the future of her children and her family as well as politics and patriotic duty. That is why she willingly let me leave her for so very long.

Mother gave me much support and encouragement in my career. She was a woman of rare kindness and benevolence. The love and labor of our parents were as big as Thai Son Mountain and as pure as water flowing from the source. We had to respect them and take care not to disappoint them. We had to try our best to take

care of mother so that she could live a few more years and share much happiness with her children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren.

During my stay I was visited by many friends. My good friend Mr. Nguyen Cuu Khon was overjoyed to hear that I had come home. He came three times but each time he missed me. So the next time he decided to wait for me. We had not seen one another for a very long time, so now we were very happy to meet again. We told one another about our lives since we had last met. He understood why I had left the country and still loved me. The day before I left he gave me a picture of a boat with wind in its sails to wish me a smooth journey.

Another good friend named Mr. Nguyen Hanh, a retired army officer, showed great concern for our family. He asked me for details about our life in England. He was relieved to hear that all was well with us.

“Have you felt any inclination to return to Vietnam?” he asked.

“No, not yet!”

He laughed and continued: “To tell you the truth, if you are doing well where you live now then stay there. The homeland has nothing to offer you. I used to believe in the homeland and as a result I lost all I had and live a hard life.”

Mr. Au Quynh Phien came to visit me. He said: “I have seen the country change so much. It is so different from before. It makes me sad. It breaks my heart. All my life I have been loyal to the party and the revolution. For their sake I sacrificed my life and my property. I have been in and out of prison. I have endured suffering and struggle – all in the hope of a better life for the masses. But now they live worse than ever. All I have left is disappointment. The revolution was all for nothing.

“I told my friend: ‘The party and government have always said that we are building a just and civilized society. Look around this world. Where is there a just society? That has nothing to do with reality.’

“My friend advised me: ‘Whatever they say, just ignore them. You don’t need to express any opinion.’”

I advised Mr. Phien: “Let go of all these issues from the past. No longer do we have to occupy our minds with them. In the past we contributed a great deal to the Vietnamese Revolution. We used to ask ourselves whether we were worthy in the eyes of the Vietnamese party, government, and people, so that we could feel proud. Now the situation has changed. We have been thrown out. Good or bad, the situation in the country is now their business. We are no longer involved. There is no need for us to think about it.”

While in Dap Da I rebuilt the graves of my maternal grandparents and of my sister Thanh. I also repaired and repainted my house to make it look clean and

beautiful. Then I organized a banquet for my relatives and friends. All the people whom I had invited showed up. Apart from neighbors, there were some retired people who had returned from the North, now all reunited under one roof. The talk was happy and intimate.

My plan was that on May 18 I would say goodbye to my mother, sisters, nieces, and nephews and fly to Saigon with Trang, the wife of my nephew Minh, who would be accompanying me to England. So I had to go a few days early to handle the paperwork.

Before setting off I asked my two sisters to go to Saigon with us. Sister Bon declined, saying that she was very busy with her family and did not like to leave mother alone. Only sister Hanh came with us. We left for Saigon at 8.30 am on May 18, but the weather was bad: it rained hard all day, the flight was delayed, and we had to wait until 5 pm for the plane to take off. We arrived safe and sound at Tan Son Nhat Airport at 6 pm. Sister Hanh had never flown on a plane before. This was her first time and she was overwhelmed.

Elder Tu Chuong expected our plane to land at 9 am. He went in his car to Tan Son Nhat Airport to meet us. As the flight was delayed, he had to wait at the airport. When by 5 pm the plane had still not arrived he returned home. I was very moved by his love and concern. It must have been tiring for him to wait so long. I felt very uneasy.

The next day after my arrival in Saigon I went to see Elder Tu Chuong. When he saw me he was overwhelmed. He hugged and kissed me for a long time. He said: "I told you the truth. You are my best friend and your family is the one I love the most. I am always thinking of you, your wife, and your children."

Then he fetched beers and breakfast and invited me to eat and drink. Over breakfast we had a very sincere talk. I thanked him for his love and concern for our family and asked him to forgive me for making him wait so long at the airport.

"It must have tired you," I said.

"Not at all," he replied. "I knew that the weather would be bad yesterday. Here too it rained hard all day. It was most inconvenient. But I felt sure that you were blessed by Heaven and would have a safe journey."

I asked him about his wife and family. His eyes filled with tears and he cried for a while before replying.

"My wife, unfortunately, has been very sick for the last two or three years. She is unable to talk, the poor dear! I built this house so that my wife and I could enjoy our retirement together. But as soon as the house was ready she fell sick. It was heartbreaking. Now she lives with our daughter, who cares for her from morning to night."

I was deeply moved by his story and could not hold back my tears. I could say no more. I just prayed that she would soon recover.

Elder Tu Chuong showed great concern for us. He asked detailed questions about the situation of each member of our family. “How is your wife? How are your children? What are they doing? How is their life? Who has married and who has not? How many grandchildren do you have?”

He asked me to write down the names of all our children and grandchildren. He asked that each child should send him a photo as a keepsake. I wrote down the names of our children and grandchildren for him. He was very happy. He saw that Chien had not married. He expressed concern and said: “I would like to introduce Chien to a suitable future wife so that he can have a happy and lasting marriage.” He told me to ask Chien what kind of girl he wanted and to let him know that he would find the right one for him.

Elder Tu Chuong continued: “This house has an empty floor upstairs. As I am old and weak, it is hard for me to go up and down stairs, so the upper floor remains unused. If Chien returns to Vietnam to marry or work, he can live there for free.”

I sincerely thanked him for his love and concern for our family.

Then he invited me, sister Hanh, and her children to go on a tour of Thu Duc and Vung Tau. Although he was old and weak and it rained hard all day, he was an enthusiastic and indefatigable guide. After the tour he invited us to dine at a famous restaurant. “If there is anything you want to eat or anywhere you want to go,” he said, “don’t hesitate to tell me.”

The next day Elder Tu Chuong invited us to visit the Cu Chi tunnels and Suoi Tien. I was worried that he would exhaust himself. Fortunately, my niece Tuyet and her husband Ha had invited us to go with them on a visit to Dalat. This gave me a good excuse to get away from Elder Tu Chuong.

So on May 20 Tuyet, her husband Ha, and their children took her mother, her brother, and me on a three-day tour to Dalat. Dalat is a vacation spa in the Central Highlands of South Vietnam. In reality, it does not have any beautiful scenery like that acclaimed in Vietnamese newspapers. Accommodation there is very expensive. We were looking for hotel rooms to sleep overnight. Some places charged 300,000 dong per night for one room. Others charged 200,000 dong. After driving around we found a newly built hotel, very clean with modern conveniences, that charged 200,000 dong. Before we even had a chance to say anything, the hotelier lowered the rate to 150,000 dong.

Eating out in Dalat is also very expensive. We went to an upscale restaurant and were charged a fortune. Whatever they charged, we had to accept it. We were four adults and four children. We had ordered a big dish of stewed fish, a dish of stir-fried pork, a dish of stir-fried chicken pieces with bok choy [Chinese cabbage], a dish of lettuce with slices of tomato and cucumber, a jug of beer, a small cup of herbal wine, and three bottles of water. The bill came to 500,000 dong. We were

flabbergasted. Then after the main course we were served eight little perfumed bananas the size of a person's big toe. None of us liked bananas, we protested that we did not want them, but they demanded that we pay an another 10,000 dong for them.

"If you don't want to eat them here," said the waiter, "then take them home with you to eat."

"But we don't like bananas."

"We are sorry, but we have already made out the receipt and cannot pay you a refund. Please understand."

So we had to cough up another 10,000 dong. It was really unfair. I concluded that eating in fancy restaurants was a waste of money and regretted that we had gone there. I suggested to Tuyet that next time we should go to a mid-scale restaurant. That is what we did, and we enjoyed a similar meal – indeed, an even better one – for just 100,000 dong. On our way back to Saigon we ate at a roadside food court and paid only 50,000—60,000 dong.

From Dalat my nephew Ha drove us deep into the jungle to view the "Golden Waterfall" and the "Silver Waterfall." This area is inhabited by the Churu ethnic minority. The jungle there is so dense that people cannot see their shadows. The road was tortuous. I was worried that if we ran out of luck the van might break down or get stuck in the mud or run over a mine. If we broke down or got stuck in the mud there would be no one around to help. If we ran over a mine we would all be blown to smithereens. However, I dared not speak and kept my fears to myself. I just followed Ha's instructions. The trip lasted all day. Luckily everyone got back to the hotel safe and sound.

On May 23 we left Dalat and returned to Saigon. The next day Tuyet and Ha held a banquet. Besides me, they invited my nephew Ngo, Elder Tu Chuong, his chauffeur Mr. Hung, and his good friend Mr. Giap, a veteran revolutionary who had been in charge of the South Vietnamese Treasury. The food was sumptuous and the talk happy and intimate.

On May 24 Ngo invited me, Hanh, and her children to dine with his family. He told us: "I now work for three Taiwanese companies. My income has risen and our standard of living has improved. I am only sorry that our children's condition is still the same. It is heartbreaking.

"Recently we had a visit from Uncle Muoi Tap. He said to me: 'Now I admire Mr. Han Hing Quang. He was very smart. He understood the situation and left the country in good time. He didn't want to stay and suffer hardship.'"

On May 25 my niece Huong and her husband held a family gathering and invited us and Tuyet's family. It was four years since I had seen our nieces and nephews. They told me about their businesses and their children's education. All had gone well. I was very happy and felt at peace.

On May 26 my nephew's wife and I prepared to depart for England. An hour before we were due to leave Elder Tu Chuong showed up at my sister Hanh's house with his jeep and chauffeur to take us to Tan Son Nhat Airport and see us off. Before he could say goodbye he choked with tears and could say no more. I was very moved. I could only comfort him and tell him not to be sad and to take care of his health. I promised to return frequently to visit him.

Although we were such good friends, Elder Tu Chuong had always been senior to me in age and in revolutionary experience. I was moved by his deep love and concern for my family and did not know how to return his feelings. I could only sincerely wish him and his whole family good health and good luck and hope that his wife would soon recover.

Chapter 44. My mother passes away

One day my sister Hanh telephoned from the homeland to let me know that our mother had passed away. After my last visit she had fallen sick and despite the many treatments she received had not recovered.

The sad news struck us like a bolt of lightning. I was panic-stricken in my sorrow. It was a grievous loss to us all. We had lost a kind and benevolent mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother.

When we heard that mother was sick we were very worried. I planned to visit her again before very long, but I had only recently returned from Vietnam and was suffering from stomach ache. Kim Anh was also sick and the children were busy working. So I could not go to Vietnam at once to take care of her even though I felt extremely uneasy. I could only ask my two sisters and my nephews and nieces to help take care of her.

Now that mother was dead, once more I was unable to get to Vietnam in time for her funeral to bid her farewell. That made me feel very sad and anxious. I wanted to return home as soon as possible to pay my respects to her and place offerings on her grave. When my stomach felt better I decided to set off right away.

I departed on March 30, 1997 and arrived at Tan Son Nhat Airport the next day. My sister Hanh and her children were at the airport to meet me. At seven o'clock on the evening of April 2 I boarded the train to Dap Da together with sister Hanh and my niece Phuc. We reached Dap Da at nine o'clock the next morning. Sister Hanh and I immediately went to visit mother's grave. The grave was solemn and well built.

Sister Hanh told me that mother had taken sick at the beginning of April 1996 because she missed me and her grandchildren so much. After my last visit, when I returned to England at the end of May, she was so sad all day that she could

not eat or drink and she fell sick again. At the beginning of September her condition deteriorated further. She received many treatments and her two daughters, her granddaughter Thu, and other relatives and friends came to take care of her. But she was already old and weak and was unable to recover. So she said her last goodbyes at one o'clock on the morning of November 24, 1996 (by the lunar calendar – October 13 of the Year of the Rat). So much sorrow!

Although mother had been sick for a very long time, her mind remained clear and alert. For example, she had saved a bottle of foreign wine. She asked Thu to fetch it for her to drink. "I don't want to leave it until after I die," she explained. "Such a waste!"

She also removed all the clothes from her closet, folded them, and sorted them into two heaps – one of old clothes, the other of new. My sisters asked her why she didn't lock them in the closet. She replied: "I am leaving them out so that whoever wants them can take them. If I lock them in the closet, it may be forced open and damaged. That would be a waste!"

Before mother fell sick she had watched the funeral of Mrs. Thong De in front of our house in Dap Da. She had been very excited. She told Thu: "I like this kind of solemn funeral. I want to have a funeral like that when I die."

"Do you really want your funeral to be like that, Grandma?"

"I am just wishing. Our family is poor. How can we do it?"

"Don't worry, Grandma. Uncle Hai and my mother will arrange it for you."

At that mother laughed in delight.

Mother instructed my sisters: "When I die you must buy me a good coffin. The funeral should be solemn and simple. Then I shall feel comfortable. Don't be too sad. All my children and grandchildren should mourn me and follow the funeral procession."

When mother learned of the death of Mrs. Hoa, her daughter Bon's mother-in-law, she handed 100,000 dong to my sister Hanh, asked her to pay Mrs. Hoa a visit, and told her to say clearly that it was an offering from Mrs. Tran Thi Quang. When mother heard that Mrs. Hoa's funeral would soon be starting, she told her daughter Bon and her grandchildren: "Go home for Mrs. Hoa's funeral, then quickly return for mine. Don't delay!"

True enough, as soon as Mrs. Hoa's funeral had ended my mother peacefully passed away. She was 87 years old. She waved goodbye to the children and grandchildren gathered around her and very gently passed away.

To honor our mother's wishes, my sisters complied with her instructions. They bought her a good coffin and everyone went into mourning and followed the funeral procession. Her nephew Mr. Tran Ke Nghi and his family also helped with the funeral. So thanks to the wholehearted help of relatives and friends the funeral was well planned.

For several days before and after mother's death some Buddhist monks came at my sisters' invitation to chant prayers for her. The funeral started at two o'clock on the afternoon of November 26, 1996 (October 15 by the lunar calendar). It was very solemn. More than two hundred people – relatives, friends, and neighbors – came to view her body and follow her coffin to her last resting place at the burial ground. Hundreds more stood along both sides of the street to watch the procession.

Sister Hanh told me: "Mother's funeral was the biggest ever in the district for an ordinary citizen."

By attending the funeral local people showed their love and respect for our mother and for our whole family and how much they missed her. We felt greatly honored and comforted.

Now mother had parted from us forever and left this world. From far away across mountains and jungles we could only stand before her image to express our infinite sorrow at her passing and pray that she would soon be free of all suffering and grant us her blessing, so that our whole family should always remain in good health and at peace.

Although mother has left this life, her kind and benevolent image will always remain in our hearts and never fade.

It so happened that my trip to Vietnam to visit my mother's grave coincided with the Festival for Tending Graves. I tended my father's grave and placed offerings on it. I also held a gathering for relatives, friends, and others who had helped prepare my mother's funeral to convey my sincere thanks to them all. I first paid a personal visit to each family, greeted them, and invited them to come to the gathering. Everyone whom I had invited came – over two hundred people. It was a very warm and friendly occasion.

The guests were full of praise for me. "Never," they said, "have we known the likes of Mr. Quang – always so grateful, respectful, loyal, and sympathetic. A rare treasure indeed."

I thanked all our relatives and friends and felt at peace. I consider that I have performed at least a part of my sacred duty to my mother.

On April 11, after a few more days at home, sister Hanh and I took the overnight train to Saigon to prepare for my return to England. Mr. Nguyen Cuu Khoi and his son came to Dieu Tri Station to see me off. We were attached to one another and did not want to part.

Sister Hanh and I had tickets for a sleeping compartment with triple-layer bunk beds. My bed was in the middle layer. It was narrow and cramped. As I am tall, I could neither sit nor lie properly. After fourteen hours of discomfort – the

journey lasted from 5 pm to 7 am – my whole body was wracked with aches and pains. Poor me!

I had time in Saigon to visit my nephew Ngo and his family as well as a few other relatives and friends. Niece Tuyet and her husband Ha took me, sister Hanh, and her child to eat at the Saigon City Restaurant four times.

I also visited Elder Tu Chuong. As on previous visits, he was overwhelmed to see me and hugged and kissed me for a long time. Then he took me and sister Hanh and her child to the Ho Binh An Hotel at Thu Duc for dinner. He offered to take me to see Cu Chi, Vung Tau, and Ca Mau. However, I was still in mourning for my mother and did not feel like going. Time was also short, and I was worried that it might be too tiring for him, so I sincerely thanked him and made some excuse to decline his offer.

Elder Tu Chuong showed great concern for us. He always asked about the health and work situation of each member of our family. He was especially concerned about Chien.

Elder Tu Chuong often told his friends and relatives that I was his best and lifelong friend and sole benefactor. It made me feel honored. Once more I sincerely thanked him for his love and concern for our family.

On April 14, after two days in Saigon, I took leave of my relatives and friends and set off for England. Elder Tu Chuong came to the airport with his good friend Mr. Giap to see me off. He gave me some bottles of beer to drink while I waited at Bangkok Airport for my connecting flight. Before we parted, he hugged and kissed me for a long time. His eyes were streaming with tears and he could not let go. I too was moved and unable to hold back my tears. I urged both Elder Tu Chuong and Mr. Giap to keep well and wished them and their families the best of health and luck. I promised that we would see one another again soon.

Chapter 45. End of my road

It was only with great reluctance that our family took the decision to leave Vietnam. We abandoned not only all the credit we had earned for our contribution to the Vietnamese revolution but also our house and other possessions won by our sweat and tears. Now we were refugees with empty hands in a foreign land and had to start our life all over again. Of course, we had to face many difficulties. But if we all, old and young, stuck together and worked hard, we could overcome the difficulties and build a new life – better and happier than the life we had left behind in Vietnam.

It is now over ten years since we settled in England and all this has indeed come to pass. All our older children now have their own lives. They all have jobs. Chien has finished university and embarked on graduate study to advance his

career. Kim Anh and I are also secure. We do not have as much to worry about as we had in Vietnam. After everything that has happened, we finally have the peace and happiness that are our due.

For this we owe thanks, first of all, to the leaders of the Vietnamese party and government. Without their anti-China and anti-Chinese campaign we would never have thought of leaving the country. In particular, we owe sincere thanks to certain leaders and friends in Nghia Binh Province who helped us overcome all obstacles to our departure, so that we could reach England safe and sound and build a new life here. We shall always remember with gratitude the help they gave us. We also enjoyed the blessings of Heaven and the protection of our kind-hearted and virtuous ancestors. We shall never forget them either.

As I look back over past events, I cannot but feel deep grief and distress. But sometimes I cannot help laughing. In 1979, during their anti-China and anti-Chinese campaign, Vietnamese party and government leaders used to say that those Overseas Chinese cadres who had been loyal to the Vietnamese revolution and were trusted on that account had now become the most dangerous element of all. Those leaders were ungrateful, betrayed their friendship with us, repaid our generosity with rancor, and forced us to leave our relatives and our homeland and seek refuge on foreign shores.

Now, however, circumstances have changed. Suddenly these same party and government leaders completely changed their tune. Now they call us “patriotic Overseas Vietnamese” and constantly urge us to forget the past, erase all the hatred, and return home with our children and grandchildren, or at least send money home, so that together we and they can rebuild Vietnam. As the proverb says, “the tongue has no bone, it twists and turns to say whatever it likes.”

Now I look back down the long road I have traveled all these decades – a road of sweetness and bitterness. Along this road I learned to endure hardships, face challenges, overcome difficulties, and sustain the self-confidence to keep pressing forward. The hardships, challenges, and difficulties enriched my life and gave it greater meaning.

Now I have reached my goal and realized my wishes. This is a happy thing and I feel proud of myself. The long road that I have traveled is finally at an end. I have written these lines for my amusement. I like to recall these old stories.